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# ENGLAND HATH NEEL OF THEE

BY  
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'THE WARDEN OF THE MARCHES,' 'WRIT IN WATER,' ETC

*WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY A PEARSE*

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# CONTENTS.

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CHAP.	PAGE
I. CININNATUS . . . . .	I
II. THE ATTRACTION OF OPPOSITES . . . . .	15
III. THE BACK OF BEYOND . . . . .	29
IV. COLONEL BROWN ACTS WITH DECISION . . . . .	44
V. THE PASSAGE PERILOUS . . . . .	58
VI. SOMETHING ROTTEN IN THE STATE . . . . .	71
VII. THE RIVAL HEIRS . . . . .	84
VIII. ISMAIL BEG . . . . .	97
IX. MANŒUVRING FOR POSITION . . . . .	110
X. THE FUGITIVES . . . . .	122
XI. ARTHUR TRIES TO DO HIS DUTY . . . . .	135
XII. BROUGHT TO THE POINT . . . . .	148
XIII. THE TRAITOR . . . . .	162
XIV. THE FIRST BLOW . . . . .	174
XV. A <i>MODUS VIVENDI</i> . . . . .	186
XVI. HOW THEY PARTED . . . . .	200
XVII. BLOW UPON BLOW . . . . .	213
XVIII. ARMS AGAINST A SEA OF TROUBLES . . . . .	225
XIX. THE SHADOW OF THE FUTURE . . . . .	238

XX. IN THE TOILS . . . . .	
XXI. THE BEGINNING OF THE END .	
XXII. THE HAZARD OF THE LOT .	
XXIII. ONE FIGHT MORE . . . . .	
XXIV. TOO LATE . . . . .	
XXV. ALL THAT WERE LEFT OF THEM	

## ILLUSTRATIONS.

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"DIE HARD!" . . . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
'BRANDISHING ABOUT HIS HEAD A GLEAMING SWORD" <i>Facing</i>	<i>p. 94</i>
"I WANT TO MAKE HIM BREAK IT OFF" . . . . .	" 184
HOW CAN I KEEP MY HANDS OFF YOU?" . . . . .	" 270



# ENGLAND HATH NEED OF THEE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### CINCINNATUS.

THE Government was in difficulties. There was nothing new in the fact, but that this Government, of all Governments, should be in difficulties that threatened its very existence, was a cause for incredulous resentment among its supporters. Taking office at the moment of one of John Bull's cold fits, when the craven fear of being great impels him suddenly and wildly to divest himself, somehow, anyhow, of as many of his responsibilities as possible, it had come into power with the mandate—so it declared, and who should know better?—to restore to the rightful owners every portion of the British Empire that could conceivably be claimed by anybody else. As yet it had not set to work on Malta or Gibraltar, for the Eastern world had offered sufficient scope for its talents. Hence its difficulties. The chief merit of the policy of scuttle is its simplicity, the chief drawback its lack of finality, since, however fast and far and firmly you may scuttle, there comes a moment when you must either scuttle farther still, or turn and recover the lost ground. The latter task was to occupy the Government's successors for fifteen or twenty years ahead, but since the Government did not know this,



the fact did not worry it. The real trouble was that scuttling is almost invariably a messy job—apt to mar the spotless white of its promoters' intentions with crimson, the crimson of the blood of some British subject or ally who has not been able to scuttle fast enough. The Government had been notably unfortunate in this respect, and John Bull was showing signs of awaking to the fact that losing an empire might be even more expensive than keeping it. That such a trifle as a death or two should alter the Government's policy could not be expected—it must be a very simple-minded person who asks regard for the individual life from a professional philanthropist—but it looked very much as though the growing public indignation might compel it to reconsider the question of withdrawing from Pahar. It had not intended to withdraw from Pahar with any flourish of trumpets—the idea had been to sneak rather than to scuttle out of the country, in the happy belief that no one would know anything about the matter.

Very few people in England had ever heard of Pahar. It lay very remote, even beyond Bala, on the way to Central Asia, and had been influenced—it could hardly in any sense be said to have been acquired—without the slightest intention of doing so. One after another, the three Khans of Pahar had sent embassies to British India, with the double desire of opening up trade and of obtaining a useful ally and protector, and England had replied by despatching one or two missions, of a mingled commercial, political and scientific nature, to exchange views and compliments with the reigning Khan, and frame commercial treaties with him, but make him no promises. Commerce duly followed on the treaties, and complaints on the commerce. Some one had to see that the treaties were kept, and the petitions and protests of the mixed multitude of British-Indian subjects who dared the perils of the journey to buy and sell in Pahar made it only natural for the Resident in Bala to send a representative to visit the state in the summer, and make sure that the

great annual fairs went off without bloodshed or too much altercation. The Khans were eager to oblige, and prompt to grant privileges, and thus, by slow degrees, Pahar came to be recognised as being, however informally, a state under British influence. Certain officials were regularly detailed to take up their residence there as soon as the passage of the mountains was possible in the spring, while when winter shut off the lofty tableland from its south-western neighbours, the paramount power was still represented by the heads of the British-Indian community.

Of course, as the Government felt, it was absurd to pretend that Britain had any responsibility for Pahar. Officially, she had never gone there, and practically, she had only to cease going there. No one would be a penny the worse, or know anything about it—except the unhappy Khan of Pahar, and he did not count. But when the India Office had no more than broached the subject to its pet Viceroy—this Government had initiated a plan of managing Indian affairs direct from home, which endeared it inexpressibly to the Services—there began to appear in the *Times* a series of letters from a pestilent person signing himself “Desdichado,” who wrote from India, and was clearly well acquainted with Pahar. A rigorous cross-examination of the soldiers and civilians who knew the territory failed to reveal the culprit, and meanwhile the valuable mineral resources of Pahar, almost untouched, its excellent system of government, and its agricultural and pastoral wealth, and above all, its strategic position, continued to be set forth with sickening cogency. Pahar formed a buffer state—the word was just coming into use—between Bala and the Empire of Sinim, which had lately displayed a tendency to aggression on the North-East Frontier, and the Paharis hated Sinim, from which they had revolted two or three generations ago, as heartily as they loved British India. John Bull also disliked Sinim, not—inconsistently enough—because its frontier pressure was already always troublesome and often dangerous, but

## 4 England hath Need of Thee

for a personal reason. Only recently, so he firmly believed, its astute rulers had substituted a condemned criminal for one of their number whose life was forfeit on account of his conniving at, if not engineering, the murder of a British consular official in his district. Politics might go hang, but if Sinim stepped in and reconquered Pahar, what would be the fate, in such hands, of the many British-Indians who had settled there and invested their substance in its growing trade? The twofold appeal of business and humanity went home to British bosoms, and the Government realised that if it meant to withdraw from Pahar, it must go about the affair with a certain subtlety.

"We are quite determined not to stay there," said the Secretary of State for India, with admirable firmness, "but the difficulty is to get away."

"Or rather, to get away without looking as if you were getting away," said his auditor, with a weary smile. His was the one great name that the Government could count on their side in the matter of their Indian policy, but it was a very great one—that of James Antony, Lord Antony of Granthiston. Old and dying now, he was still to all middle-aged Britons the man who had saved India at the time of the Mutiny, and he had always advocated the plan of withdrawing British frontiers within closely restricted limits.

"It's not as if we had merely to stop sending our agents," lamented the statesman. "Now that the question has been raised, we must secure the safety of all British subjects."

"By bringing 'em away, willy-nilly? Not precisely child's play!"

"That's just it. Not one of the men we have sounded will take the responsibility of directing the withdrawal. They talk about the Sinites' treading hard on our heels, but that's merely pernicious nonsense, of course. Sinim doesn't want Pahar; she has plenty of territory already. We should give her to understand very decidedly that an advance on her part is out of the question."

"Wise birds those men of yours. You need something more than words to impress Sinim."

"I understood you were in agreement with the Government's policy," said the Secretary of State, somewhat stiffly. "Yet you appear to imply that it is impossible of execution."

"Not impossible, but uncommon difficult—in this instance. I know one man who could do it if it can be done, but he would see you a good deal further first."

"Oh, we'll deal with his objections all right! Who is he?"

"Charteris—Sir Robert Charteris."

"Charteris? Not—the Lodovick man?"

"Exactly," with a grim smile.

"But he would be overjoyed to be employed again."

"Quite so. Offer him the job, and see."

"It would be altogether out of the question. We have all spoken against him in the House and outside—urged his prosecution——"

"Oh, I never said there would be no humble pie to go round. But, mind you, Charteris ain't taking any."

"Of course, in a matter of such importance—An expression of regret in an unofficial capacity—it might be arranged, if he would really undertake the business."

"But he wouldn't. I said he could, not that he would. Not if you all went on your knees to him, and published abject apologies in every paper in England."

"That shows a very bad spirit. The Lodovick prosecution was merely a passing political incident, and his costs were paid out of the public purse."

"By the other side—and four years after." Lord Antony had stood at the side of Sir Robert Charteris during the abortive attempts to put him on his trial for his suppression of the Lodovick Insurrection, and could afford to crow over his political friends on the subject. With what seemed to the Secretary for India

a curiously perverted pride, he added slowly, "But you need not fear his bearing malice. If the matter was one in which he felt his duty to the country called him, he wouldn't care if the devil himself asked him to take it up. He would do it."

"But then the thing is as good as done, according to you."

"Not a bit of it. This particular thing would not be consistent with his duty to the country, d'ye see? Ask Bob Charteris to surrender a foot of so-called British soil—to Sinim, as he will say—and see what he'll answer you. Why, man, at the very height of the Mutiny he tendered his resignation to me rather than withdraw from Shah Bagh, which I had made up my mind to do. If he wouldn't do it then for me, his old friend and his chief, d'ye think he'll do it for you, whom he has no cause to love?"

"But we are still at Shah Bagh," objected the ruler, whose study of Indian History had begun with the day on which he accepted office.

"Governor-General overrode me, supported him," growled Lord Antony. "I owe Charteris one for that, but all the same, you need not try to persuade me that he will undertake to evacuate Pahar or anywhere else for you."

"Now really, my dear James, you have been talking too long," said Lady Antony, entering noiselessly. "Mr Paynter, I am afraid I must send you away."

The Secretary of State pondered the matter as he went down the steps, looking at it, perhaps—or so the course of subsequent events would suggest—with that curious obliquity of mental vision which is the foible of some normally good men. The end is everything, the means negligible. And when the end was the salvation of the Government, there may well have seemed to be something sacred about it. Ten days later—the death and public funeral of Lord Antony had intervened—that noted diplomat Sir Augustus Hindley was sent down to the pleasant village of Camberhurst, charged with a mission to Sir Robert

Charteris in his retirement. It was the day after Lord Antony's funeral, and Sir Robert and his brother-in-law, Colonel Gerrard, who had both attended the ceremony in the Abbey, were pacing up and down and exchanging reminiscences of the dead man—firm friend and autocratic chief as he had been to them both. They were walking on the ramparts, as the neighbourhood called the raised bank at the foot of their gardens, which adjoined one another. It was a joke in Camberhurst that the first duty of every morning was to go round by Sir Robert's house and see what improvements he had made since the day before. His garden and Colonel Gerrard's were a joint domain, and together they carried out changes which left their quiet neighbours breathless, making a kind of Japanese landscape on a large scale, planting a patch of forest here to shut out the too obtrusive view of a house close at hand, and concealing the homely dustbin behind a beetling cliff. There was a lake, with a boat and water-lilies, and there were innumerable bowers, arbours and summer-houses, all designed with an eye to the comfort of Lady Charteris, who—dear soul!—found each more to be admired than its predecessor, and would not have breathed the words earwigs, damp or draughts, on any consideration. Since her husband seemed to find in landscape-gardening some outlet for the abounding energy which his country refused to allow him to use in her service, he might reconstruct the Theban Labyrinth or the Caves of Elephanta in the back garden if it gave him any pleasure. The ramparts were a comparatively late addition to the amenities of the estate, and passengers on the byroad below them were apt to linger and observe with interest the two elderly officers marching backwards and forwards, and conversing with the free use of gesture and of Christian names which marked them as survivors of a more demonstrative generation. Now Sir Robert paused abruptly at one end of the rampart, and pointed with his cane to the rustic flight of steps—earth supported

## 8      England hath Need of Thee

by baulks of weather-beaten timber—which led up to it.

"Must see after that next, Hal," he announced. "That fool of a gardener said masonry would look out of place, and this morning Marian caught her foot and would have fallen from top to bottom if I had not been here. A good *pucca* staircase—that's what we must have."

"And the same at our end, I suppose?" said Colonel Gerrard, making mental calculations. "Jolly expensive business, Bob, and Honour ain't likely to set foot on it."

"No, but Rosey's little girls will, when they come next—trotting everywhere, bless their little hearts! How would you like one of them to get a bad fall on these uneven steps—eh, you insensible grandparent?"

"Oh, all serene, but it'll mean putting off the signal-tower, and I thought you were pretty keen on that."

"That can wait. The little brass gun ain't forthcoming for the present, I understand."

"Arthur is wretchedly slack about getting it for you," said Colonel Gerrard with displeasure. "I'll stir him up a bit."

"My good Hal, I beg you won't do anything of the sort." Any blame of his nephew always roused Sir Robert to wrath. "Arthur and I understand each other uncommonly well, and I'll swear he's doing his best."

"I have no patience with the young men of the present day!" averred Colonel Gerrard, with absolute truth. "Anything like their dulness and deadness and slackness we never saw in our time."

"Their manners are quieter, but the right stuff's there all the same. We didn't think so much about good form as they do, but they're sound at bottom."

"But we had interests—enthusiasms!" cried Colonel Gerrard. "Try to get Arthur interested in anything, and you might as well tickle a dead fish! It's that perpetual smoking, I believe—cigars, cigars, all day."

"Well, I ain't precisely a non-smoker myself. And

Arthur reads a lot, you take my word for it, and thinks a lot too."

"Reads! and what good does it do him? He won't talk about it. Why, I used to be mad on Tennyson, as you know—and anybody else might have known it too. Of course these authors nowadays ain't a patch on those of forty years ago, but the young chaps have all our old poets and so on to read and be enthusiastic about, and they won't."

"It's their way, that's all—their way. And I was never enthusiastic about anything in the reading line, you know—unless it was the *New Sporting Magazine*. Give Arthur the chance of doing something, and see if he don't go for it just as we should have done."

"That's just it," said Colonel Gerrard, with disgust. "Think where we were at Arthur's age, Bob—the things we had done, the service we had seen! And the boy has never heard a shot fired in anger."

"My dear fellow, that's his misfortune, not his fault. The times you and I lived in can never come again—the world ain't big enough. So don't take it out of Arthur, who's an uncommon decent little chap, and is storing up all he reads and hears to astonish us with some day."

"Little chap!" The epithet was unfortunate, for Arthur's lack of height was one of his sins, but fortunately Colonel Gerrard's attention was distracted by a passer-by in the lane below—a distinguished-looking gentleman in faultless London clothes, who was picking his way through stones and mud with evident affliction. "Some one seems to have lost his way."

At the sound of the voice the stranger looked up. His eyes were singularly expressionless, his hair and luxuriant beard scarcely touched with grey. "My dear Charteris, this is indeed a pleasure!" he said languidly, as he saw the two faces looking down at him. "I seem to have been misdirected on leaving the station—or is this really the entrance to your inhospitable abode?"



## To England hath Need of Thee

"Scaling-ladder here," said Sir Robert promptly, dragging forward the head of something that looked like a fire-escape, "but there is a front door, if you would prefer to go round to it."

"Thanks, I really think I should," was the reply, with the merest glance from the rusty iron ladder to the speaker's pale grey trousers. "How do, Gerrard? The ladies quite well, I trust?"

"Tiptop," returned Sir Robert. "Come along this way, Hindley, then round the corner of the next garden there, and we'll meet you at the front. You haven't left Lady Hindley in difficulties with the mud further down the lane, I hope?"

"I assure you she would be far more capable of negotiating the difficulties than I am. But this is a business errand, Charteris—strictly confidential."

"A gentle hint to me," said Colonel Gerrard, as Sir Augustus Hindley disappeared round the corner of the next garden, and they hurried down the steps. "I'll vanish, Bob."

"Mere matter of form," said Sir Robert lightly. "You know as well as I do that whatever Hindley's mysterious errand may be, you'll hear about it as soon as he's gone, next to Marian."

But when the interview was over, and Sir Robert had seen his visitor to the station, he came back to his brother-in-law's house before entering his own, and whistled outside till Colonel Gerrard joined him in the garden, then led the way to the ramparts in silence.

"My dear Bob, what's up? Hindley was merely a messenger, I suppose. The Government can't have come to their senses and determined to do you justice at last?"

"Shouldn't I have told Marian that first thing? No, but they want me to go to Pahar."

"The Government—want to send you—?"

"Precisely. They have abused me high and low, up and down and round about the country, for ten years. I can't say they have ruined my life—thank Heaven,

that's not in their power—but they have certainly blasted my career. And now they come and ask me to pull 'em out of a hole!"

"And you refused, of course?"

"My dear Hal, I did—in language you would be the first to disapprove. But that was only what Hindley was expecting. He confessed he was not particularly proud of his errand, and agreed with me that some expression of regret might have been looked for. However, it wasn't forthcoming—unless the offer of employment might be considered to cover it."

"I never heard such arrant impudence! And they ask you to go out and evacuate Pahar?"

"No, that's the point of the joke. Not to evacuate Pahar, but to keep it."

"My dear Bob, it ain't ours to keep."

"Quite true, though it would puzzle the man in the street to say whose it is and whose it isn't. But it seems the Government are badly frightened over the Desdichado letters. Of course the stalwarts go on saying 'Evacuate and be hanged to 'em!' but the rest don't see the fun of being turned out on such a minor question—as they consider it. So they decided on a compromise. I was to be asked to go out and investigate—commercial and strategic value of the country, political conditions, designs of the Sinites, possibility of setting up a stable government if we did withdraw, and so on. Well, we know what that means; they are going to climb down and stay, but they won't say so just yet."

"But why call upon you—you—to do it?"

"Why, it seems that Antony told them I was the man for the job. Poor old James! just like him, ain't it, to remember his friends to the last?"

"I can't make it out," said Colonel Gerrard despairingly. "Antony must have known you would never recommend evacuation, and yet that is their declared policy."

"No, you don't see the point yet. If I don't go, they evacuate at once, but if I do go, it gives time for

the more moderate spirits to bring the others round to their view. Oh, I don't pretend they are actuated by any higher motive than the safety of their seats, but—hang it, Hal!—what do their motives signify if they do the right thing, and keep Sinim away from our frontier?"

"D'ye think they're on that tack? They won't do the right thing, Bob. All they think of is shifting their responsibility on somebody else, and when they get a favourable opportunity they'll throw you over."

"If they do, they must," said Sir Robert, his face hardening. "But no, Hal, I won't believe that—even of them. They are really in a funk this time—their picking out me, of all men, proves it. There are plenty of fellows they might have sent out if they had only wanted to save their face and withdraw all the same, but my opinions are well known. They wouldn't choose me if they weren't in earnest."

"That's merely to throw dust in the eyes of the public," persisted Colonel Gerrard. "Bob don't take it."

"My dear Hal, I must. You and I are such hide-bound old reactionaries that we can't credit the present lot of men even with common honesty. But surely we may allow them sense enough not to take the means best calculated to defeat their own object? It's quite clear to me that they are sending me out to cover their climb-down. In face of the *Times* correspondence they know now that they can't withdraw, but they daren't stand on their own feet and say so. They must have an expert—as people call it nowadays—to back them up."

"They will manage somehow to do the dishonest thing, and you will be sacrificed."

"Well, old boy, better men have been sacrificed before. If I have a chance—the merest fighting chance—of preventing a hideous blunder, as bad for our own frontiers as for the poor Paharis who have trusted us, d'ye expect me not to take it? You know me better."

"And so do they, and that's what they are calculating on," said Colonel Gerrard bitterly. "Well, you'll take me with you, Bob?"

"I asked for you first thing. But Hindley said there was no question of a regular staff at present. Couple of aides, subaltern commanding the escort, doctor—that's the style as long as I am merely on a mission. Afterwards things can be regularised."

"Then what is your official capacity?"

"Governor-General's Agent, I imagine. Hindley talked about Commissioner, but I pointed out to him that we don't appoint Commissioners in other people's territory. It may come to be a Residency, of course."

"And do you propose to take Marian?"

"Not this year, on any account. How could I, when I don't know what the journey's like, or whether there's any place where she could live? No, but next year, if all goes well, and I stay on, you and Honour might come out with her, and we'll make a shooting-party after mountain sheep. Rayther different from our old tiger-hunts—eh?"

"You have it all cut and dried, I see."

"Now don't turn rusty, Hal. It ain't like you. Tell you what, if I can't take you I'll have Arthur, and that friend of his he's always talking about."

"Is that supposed to make it any better for me?"

"Tons better. D'ye dare to tell me Arthur won't be made a man of—Granthistan style, old pattern—if I take him to Pahar under my wing? And ain't that what you're wanting all day long? He'll know as much about the frontier as Desdichado himself before I've done with him."

"I suppose Hindley shed no light on Desdichado?"

"He did, without knowing it. What he was charged to do was to enquire if I knew who he was, which I was able to assure him with perfect truth I didn't. But something he said about one of the letters he had managed to get a sight of by some hanky-panky—native paper, curious capitals, and so on—made me

pretty certain that Desdichado is the man who has the best right to the name."

"You can't mean that drunken old scoundrel who used to pretend to command the Habshiabad troops in our time?"

"Not the man himself, certainly, but his son."

"But the son was at Parasganj with us in the Mutiny, and got his commission for gallantry in the siege. Brown, he called himself—quite a decent ordinary fellow—married some major's daughter, all as humdrum as you please, not a bit of a firebrand. Thought I'd heard he was dead, too."

"Oh, the man I mean is the elder brother, who never came into your ken at all. He raised a troop of Volunteer Horse, and was always called Colonel, though he wasn't. Married a native, I believe. At any rate, the last I heard of him was that he was as eccentric as they make 'em, living in the wilds and spending his time hunting and exploring. If that ain't the chap we want, I'll eat my hat. At any rate, you may be sure that as soon as I get to Granthistan I shall look up Colonel Tricesimus Brown, and take him up to Pahar with me if he'll go. If he don't know the inns and outs of the present situation, no one does."

"Then you are determined to go, Bob?"

"What do you think? D'ye tell me you wouldn't go if you were in my place?"

## CHAPTER II.

## THE ATTRACTION OF OPPOSITES.

ARTHUR GERRARD was a proud and happy man when he found himself duly seconded from his battery for special service in Pahar. Not that this frame of mind was uncommon with him, for he was blessed with a supremely contented disposition. All his friends, all his relations, all his possessions, left nothing to be desired. He was firmly convinced that his sister Rose was the prettiest young married woman in England, and that Tom Weston, her husband, was the very pink and prince of parsons—with the additional halo of having begun his career as a soldier—and their little girls the jolliest kids in creation. His battery—officers, men, horses and guns—was the finest in the British Army; nay, the dull station in which he was normally quartered was the nicest and most friendly place in India. And now, over and above all his other blessings, came the joy of being chosen to accompany his uncle—whom he honestly regarded as the greatest and the worst treated soldier-statesman of the age—on an expedition which any one might have been proud to join. It could only be because he was at home on leave, and so Sir Robert had happened to think of him—for Arthur's satisfaction with his surroundings did not extend to himself. He knew he was a disappointment to his father; even his mother could only say how thankful they ought to be that he was so steady. With such parents, and such an ancestry as he pos-

sessed, he ought to have been brilliant, and he was merely steady. It was the same in society. To the hostesses of his acquaintance he was a never-failing standby—"such a nice steady young fellow, my dear, so thoroughly dependable——" and they requited his eager usefulness by assigning him invariably to the service of the elderly, the plain and the tart, among their lady guests. There was nothing romantic in his appearance—for he was a short, thick-set young man, whom no uniform could make really smart-looking—and if there was a wistful look in his eyes sometimes, they set it down to his unsatisfied passion for helping people, and promptly gratified it. It never struck them that it bespoke a craving for romance. Though he might only scan from a distance the girls with whom his more fortunate comrades talked and danced and flirted, yet he did it with a keen and breathless interest, for might not any one of them be *The Girl*? He could no more have confessed to this hidden excitement than he could have shared in the flamboyant romanticism in which his father had luxuriated in the forties, but in the secret of his heart he was ever on the watch for the one woman. It was not in the least likely she would ever look at him, but that did not signify. He would know her when he found her, and from that moment his worship, his service, his life itself, would be hers. He was quite aware that his world would find his dream merely grotesque, but he thought the girl herself would understand. She would permit, perhaps even value, his devotion, and he would never dream of expecting her to return it. Such rewards were for the brilliant men, men like his friend Lionel Grandier, who he felt, without resentment, would have made a much more satisfactory son to his parents than he did. Grandier was everything he was not, and represented the actual, as *The Girl* did the ideal, romance of his life. They had been together at Woolwich, where Grandier carried all before him and passed triumphantly into the Engineers, while Arthur plodded humbly into the Artillery. Thence

their courses had diverged for a time, though in India they met occasionally, for whenever short leave was to be had, Grandier's presence drew his faithful adorer like a magnet. But Grandier had had all the chances, a fine piece of work on a frontier expedition making him a captain in record time, while Arthur remained contentedly a lieutenant—contentedly, because why should he expect to get promotion?—the one thing he grudged his friend being his taste of war service. The sole drawback to coming home on leave was the necessity of leaving Grandier in India, which made it impossible to exhibit his perfections to the people at home. But if Arthur's family were cruelly deprived of the sight of his paragon, at any rate they heard plenty about him, for Arthur was never tired of talking of his good looks, his cleverness, his achievements in war and peace, and the high opinion entertained of him by his superiors.

It was, of course, of Grandier that he was talking this particular afternoon, when he was helping Lady Charteris to pack Sir Robert's things. Sir Robert had gone up to the India Office to see the Secretary of State, and Lady Charteris had declared her intention of getting most of his packing done, with her nephew's help. Nothing would induce her to delegate the task to any one else, and she wrapped and folded the clothes, while Arthur rammed them into the boxes, reducing any specially obstinate bundle to subjection by standing on it. A cable had been sent to Grandier, offering him the post of secretary to Sir Robert on his mission to Pahar, and a delighted acceptance received, so that in Arthur's view the success of the mission was assured. It troubled him a little that Lady Charteris did not seem quite as much elated as he would have expected. She appeared even rather depressed, but no doubt this was due to the prospect of so soon parting with her husband, and Arthur set himself to cheer her.

"You see, aunt, with Grandier there, you may be quite sure Uncle Robert is properly looked after.



He'll take as good care of him as you could yourself."

"But I am counting on you for that, Arthur," she replied, with the smile which Sir Robert still thought the most beautiful thing in the world. "No stranger could look after him as you can. And I shall want you to write to me about him very often—only a scrap if you have not time for more, but just to say if he is well and cheerful, and not getting fever or taking unnecessary risks."

"Oh, I'll write all right," he assured her. "But you know, Grandier——"

"And I want you to do more than that." She interrupted him with a feverish haste that seemed uncalled-for. "I want you to keep him cheerful—to suggest pleasant thoughts— Oh, my dear!"

For Arthur, in his anxiety to make a particular package fit into the place assigned to it, had leapt into the air and come down upon it with both feet close together, to the accompaniment of the sound of broken glass. His aunt had sprung forward to rescue it, but fell back into her chair with her hand to her heart.

"My dear boy, there was a bottle of quinine inside that roll of vests," she said faintly.

"Oh, I say, I'm awfully sorry!" Arthur was all contrition. "I fancied I felt something squash. Let me get it out, and we'll see. Yes, it is broken, I'm afraid. I'll just cart away the broken glass, and then we'll hang the vest out to dry. There! it'll be as right as rain in no time. But I say, aunt—" struck by his companion's silence—"you look awfully bad. Was it the fright? Won't you—er—lie down? Can't I get you something?"

"No, it was my own fault; I ought not to have moved so quickly. I shall be all right in a minute. But, Arthur, that was just what I wanted to say to you. I want you to keep your uncle from thinking I am ill."

"But are you ill?" he asked bluntly. She shivered a little, and answered evasively.

"I had a long illness—you remember?—at the time your uncle came back from Lodovick. I knew it might recur—I made the doctors tell me—but I have never told him. And lately—— Well, your mother and I went up to London on the day of Lord Antony's funeral, to see a doctor. But I have not told your uncle."

"A bit rough on him—to let him go on making all his preparations when he won't be going."

"He will be going. I have thanked God a hundred times a day that he won't see me suffer—that he will know nothing about it. And that is how you must help me, Arthur. I shall write to him just the same—I *will* do it—but he might notice something—the handwriting, perhaps. Then you must be ready to suggest that the hot weather is trying me, or that I have been overdoing myself, or anything that will make him feel satisfied about me."

"But he will be awfully waxy when he finds out——"

"My dear boy, I can bear that. What I can't bear is the thought that he should lose this chance on my account. Everybody says now that his appointment is equivalent to a complete acquittal of all the charges brought against him, but if he was unable to take it no one would trouble to ask the reason—they would only say that something had come out after all that made him impossible. And when you see how he is throwing himself into the whole thing—why, it's like new life to him to be going to India again—he looks twenty years younger—do you think I would keep him back if I were dying?"

She sat up very straight, a red spot on either cheek, her hands clutching tightly the arms of the chair, as she shot out the words, and her agitation alarmed Arthur. "All right, aunt," he said soothingly. "Don't get into a state. I was a silly idiot to say what I did. Of course he would never be angry with you. What I meant was—don't you think he'd be hurt?"

"Was I hurt, though he hid all his troubles from me when he came back from Lodovick? I knew nothing—absolutely nothing—of all the persecution he went through until, by the purest chance, I found he was being brought up at Bow Street that very day. But he did it to spare me, I knew that—and I am going to spare him."

"Man doesn't want to be spared things he oughtn't to be spared—decent man, at any rate," growled Arthur cryptically.

"Well, then, I am going to spare myself," was the swift rejoinder. "You know how your poor uncle feels every ache and pain of mine. What do you think it would be to him to watch me suffer—as I shall suffer—and know that he could do nothing in the world to relieve me? Arthur, it would kill me to know what he was going through. I should not dare to groan, knowing how it would wring his heart—and it does help one sometimes to groan out loud, you know. At least, you don't know yet, but you may some day. And he will do his splendid work—saving Pahar, and keeping Sinim back, and making the frontier secure—you know everybody says he is the only person in the world who can do it—and at any rate I shall not have hindered him."

"It doesn't seem fair to him," persisted Arthur, hardening his heart. "If I had a wife"—his tanned face grew a thought redder—"I should be awfully sore if I found she had been going through a thing like this and had never let me know. What do my people think about it?"

"Your mother quite understands. Your father disapproves, but he has consented not to say anything. My dear boy," impatiently, "if you can't conscientiously help me as I ask you, pray don't do it, but do leave me to manage my own concerns in my own way."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Arthur again. "Of course I'll do what you want, aunt, but to think of you going through all this—and uncle knowing nothing

## The Attraction of Opposites

about it—— Makes a fellow feel a bit queer, you know."

Lady Charteris pulled down his face to hers and kissed him on the forehead. "You are a dear boy, Arthur. And I think the girl you marry"—she was far too old-fashioned to say "the girl who marries you"—"will have a very good, nice husband. If I ever see her I shall tell her so."

If Arthur went home that evening burdened with a curious sense of treachery to his uncle, he was obliged to own to himself that Lady Charteris seemed to be right in her estimate of the political situation. Sir Robert's appointment served completely to satisfy the British public, which ceased from troubling as by magic when it found that the Pahar matter had passed into his safe hands. The *Times*, pluming itself gently on the result of its intervention, observed that the Government's appeal to Sir Robert and his reception of the overture, if somewhat surprising, were equally honourable to both parties. The papers which had supported the ex-Governor of Lodovick throughout his long agony were jubilant in expressing their conviction that the action of the administration amounted to a full confession of the baselessness of the charges formerly brought against him by its members. The Government organs, on the other hand, were anxious to imply, though they did not venture to say so, that nothing was withdrawn. They made dark allusions to an amnesty, adding sourly that the reasons why one should be granted were not patent to the ordinary observer. The attitude of the high officials with whom Sir Robert came in contact was something similar, for they made no pretence of acting *con amore* in the matter of his appointment, and Colonel Gerrard, who was present at most of the interviews, observing the extreme disapproval with which both parties viewed one another, gleaned the idea that things in Pahar must be far worse than was known to the general public, and Sir Robert's mission something in the nature of a last resort.

The very briefest space intervened between the appointment and Sir Robert's sailing for India, for it was all-important that he should be able to enter Pabar as soon as the passes were open. Grandier was to meet him at Bombay, and a representative of the Government of India at Ranjitgarh, that time might not be lost by going to Calcutta. His last few days at home were chiefly occupied in making every possible arrangement that experience or imagination could suggest for his wife's health and comfort, and in settling—in so far as they could be settled—the affairs of the handsome, bad-tempered young widow who lived opposite, and whose trustee he was. People in Camberhurst could never imagine why Sir Robert and Lady Charteris were so kind to that ungrateful little Mrs Arbuthnot, nor why she clung so obstinately to their neighbourhood when it was clear that she disliked them so intensely. Her ten-year-old son would fain have been Sir Robert's shadow whenever he was out of school, but as Mrs Gerrard—who did not mince her words—said, "Aurora Arbuthnot was not satisfied with making that poor child miserable herself; she wouldn't let any one else make him happy." Fortunately the boy was not as miserable as might have been expected. Perhaps his early sensitiveness had been ground out of him by constant alternations of violent fondness, unreasonable dislike and equally unreasonable jealousy, or in self-defence his nature had developed a kind of protective hardness, remarkable in one so young. He bowed to the many storms which swept over him, instinctively concealing with care any wound he received, lest his mother should know where to plant her next shaft, and became a merry and affectionate child again when he could escape to Sir Robert. Keen eyes watched him even there, for Sir Robert could not forget that the boy's grandmother had been a princess of Bala; but at least he was just, and did not, like Mrs Arbuthnot, attribute as crimes to the child faults and foibles due to his ancestry, while in Lady Charteris's gentle presence

the sorely tried little heart found rest, as did every weary soul that came near her.

The partings were over, and Arthur began to feel the weight of his guilty secret less oppressive. His aunt had shown herself so strong, so alert, in doing everything and thinking of everything that was necessary in the last few bustling days, that he ceased to wonder at his uncle's blindness. Nay, he began to comfort himself with the conviction that the alarm had been a false one, that the specialist was mistaken. No woman stricken with a mortal disease could have kept up as Lady Charteris did, or have entered so hopefully into her husband's plans for their reunion in a year or even less. When distance had at last hidden her from Sir Robert's sight as she stood between her sister and Colonel Gerrard on the quay, and Arthur tramped with him up and down the deck, his gruff murmur, "After all, it ain't for so very long, and I couldn't leave her in better hands," seemed to sum things up quite satisfactorily. The voyage was pleasant, though there were few indeed of Sir Robert's contemporaries returning to India nowadays, and at Aden they were met by news which tended still further to turn their thoughts from the things which lay behind to those before. A Bala force, led by Europeans in the Bala service, had come unexpectedly upon a Sinite column in the mountains between Bala and Pahar, and failed to induce it to retire. The Granthistan authorities, considering the matter one of urgency, sent a small British-Indian force to give moral support to the Bala army, and on their advance as far as Raiyati the Sinites retreated. Nevertheless, their presence at all so far south-west showed that rumours of a British withdrawal had percolated even through the closed passes, and stimulated Sinim to dangerous activity.

Any event that afforded even the remotest prospect of fighting was of course grateful to Arthur, and he found it difficult to appreciate his uncle's reasons for regarding the collision with uneasiness. Sir Robert's military ardour had cooled with age, he was a late

## England hath Need of Thee

convert to the terrible heresy that every possible means must be tried before having recourse to arms— Arthur excused him in his mind, quite unaware of the injustice he was doing to the man who in his youth had maintained the British peace successfully on the most warlike frontier in the world. It was a dreadful thought on landing at Bombay that Grandier might imagine his chief had somehow turned into a peace-at-any-price man, and a distinct relief when the hero, eagerly catechized in private, expressed with due reserve his general approval of Sir Robert's intended course and methods. The plan of seeking out the elusive Desdichado commended itself particularly to him, but the reason for this, when he learned it in a secret midnight conclave, proved sadly disappointing to Arthur. He sat leaning forward in his chair in Grandier's room at the hotel, on the alert not to miss one word that fell from his idol's lips, and feasting his gaze on the perfect profile and the beautiful eyes which were really wasted on a man, as Grandier's lady admirers said. His French ancestry—a great-grandfather was a fugitive at the time of the Revolution—had given Lionel Grandier a certain grace of manner which made every action pleasing to watch, and it was this charm, even more than his personal beauty, that bound Arthur so closely to him. In return, Grandier reposed in his friend many curious confidences, secure that his trust would never be abused.

"You see, I'm awfully interested about this Desdichado person," he said, lighting another cigar, "because I am on the track of just such another old buffer myself."

"You?" said Arthur, astonished.

"Not for his own sake—you can be jolly well sure of that. As a matter of fact, it's—a girl."

"Of course it is!" was the scornful reply. Convention demanded that Grandier should remain totally ignorant of the devotion he inspired, wherefore Arthur was pleased to pose as a severe and contemptuous critic of his words and ways. "It always is a girl, with you. If you went to the North Pole, the first

person you saw would be an Eskimo damsel you had chummed up with at a wild-beast show."

"And why at a wild-beast show, pray?"

"Because she would be in charge of the Polar bear, of course. But go ahead. I know there will be no sense to be got out of you till you've told the horrid truth."

"Well, then, it was at the very beginning of last cold weather. Everybody wasn't down from the Hills, even, but there was a big *tamasha* on at Ranjitgarh—twenty-fifth anniversary of some Durbar that was supposed to have marked the end of the Mutiny, or something of the sort. A lot of us went to the ball—some quite decent people were going, and we thought there might be a chance of some fun. And, my word! they did rake up some quaint old survivals, I can tell you. Well, Marsden and I were looking them over casually, when there came in the most amazing old fellow you ever beheld, with Piccadilly weepers, if you'll believe me"—the present generation may need to be reminded that these were the long whiskers which brushed the owner's chest—"and some fancy uniform of Mutiny date. With him was a stout lady—the sort of good old frump that never looks complete without her knitting—and behind them came a girl. If you can imagine——"

"Oh, skip all that part," interrupted Arthur firmly. "I've heard you on girls before, you know—just once or twice. Let's take the raptures as—rapt, and leave it that she was quite too more than utterly utter—eh?—and get to business."

"Her eyes met mine across the room—such eyes, too! She blushed—and sparkled at the same time—I can't describe it——"

"And your susceptible heart fell down plop on the well-waxed floor at her dainty feet? I know. Does you great credit, my dear sir. Go on."

"It does do me credit," said Grandier mournfully, "for I give you my word for it, she was the worst dressed woman in the whole room—and there were some old frights there, as I said. Clothes *dirsee-made*,



## 26 England hath Need of Thee

of course—that's nothing, but if you can conceive a theatrical wardrobe-dealer's in the Bazar, and a rig-out selected from his stock, you'll know what her dress was like. Not the faintest pretence to fashion, of course, not a vestige of bustle—though another girl I danced with told me that she and the old aunt must have worked all day trying to tie back their gowns with tapes when they saw what was being worn."

"Fancy giving the poor wretches away like that! And what extraordinary things women do talk to you about!" said Arthur repressively. Grandier chuckled.

"It's a gift, my dear boy—the faculty of inviting confidences, I mean. You'll never have it, if you live to a hundred, so don't be afraid anybody will make awful revelations to you. But they all do it with me. If I met your sister, I'll lay anything you like that in half an hour she would have told me the shop where her dearest friend gets her false hair."

"She wouldn't make a friend of any one who wore false hair," said Arthur, so indignantly that Grandier fell into helpless laughter.

"You are a treat, old man! But that's just what I say. Even your sister hasn't told you—see?—but I should hear it in no time. Well, ragbag clothes or not, you may be sure I wasn't long in getting introduced to the charming Miss Brown."

"Brown, eh? Bit of a blow for your aristocratic mind, wasn't it?"

"Not a scrap. 'A rose by any other name,' you know. The old uncle was an awful bother at first, mounting guard most ferociously, and looking as if he was going to demand everybody's intentions, but after a bit he was good enough to take himself off, and the old lady—who was a governess, not an aunt—went peacefully to sleep, so the girl and I were able to be happy. She couldn't dance a step, though I believe it was really that she was too much taken up with looking at every one and comparing them with people in books. Just imagine! she lives somewhere up in the Hills, and never sees a white face but those two respectable old codgers. House full of books, and so

was her head; she kept asking me if people were not like Lord Evandale, or Richard Clare, or Vereker Vane, or some other buffer I had never heard of. She thought the Lieutenant-Governor was like Sir Arthegal, and let on that her deplorable gown was made after the pattern of some queen or other—Elizabeth or Berengaria or some one. We were getting on like a house afire, I can tell you, when all at once up comes the old uncle in a towering passion and sweeps her off, gathers up the governess, only half-awake, on his other arm, and stalks from the room. I ventured to offer to help with their wraps——”

“And exchange a sweet message of farewell?”

“There was no chance. All I could manage to whisper was, ‘When shall we meet again?’ Sort of thing one says to a hundred girls in a season, you know, but the odd part of the business was that I did want to meet her again, and do still. I found out their hotel, and was going to call the next day, but Marsden was out early, and saw the whole party driving off to the station in a *tucca-gari*, the poor little girl looking very white and miserable. And from that day to this I have seen and heard nothing of her!”

“Well, isn’t it a gratifying testimony to your dangerous charms that the uncle should have snatched her so promptly out of your way?”

“But that had nothing to do with it.” There was distinct injury in Grandier’s tone. “I heard afterwards what it was that had put the old beggar into such a wax, when I was talking to some of the men who had been in the smoking-room. It seems that some one who knew Bala well had been telling them about this old Colonel Brown—who’s no more a colonel than I am. His father had to leave his regiment—for the usual reason—and went and lived native in the Habshiabad state, though his wife stuck to him all through. There were two boys, and the younger one broke away in time, did well in the siege of Parasganj and got a commission. He married all right, and this girl Noel was his daughter. But the elder, before his father drank himself to death, had married a native,

## England hath Need of Thee

the daughter of some black *padri* of sorts, by way of improving matters, and the natives will never allow him to be a *pucca* Sahib. He raised some sort of troop in the Mutiny, and was given a grant of land in the Agpur district. But he had a daughter, a jolly handsome girl, who saw fit to marry the Maharajah of Agpur—awfully bad hat, you may remember—and though she had only followed his own example, old Brown raised Cain generally, cast her off, forsook his *jaghir*, and retired into the wilds of Bala. The fellows in the smoking room were just getting awfully interested, when old Brown himself popped out from behind a curtain, perfectly speechless with rage. He had bribed the servants to let him sit in there to smoke his *huga*, if you please, and had only been waked out of that sort of dreamy state the natives get into by hearing his own name. He thought he had covered all his tracks, apparently, and when he found people still remembered him as the Maharani's father, nothing would suit him but to go and lose himself again."

"Poor old chap!" said Arthur.

"Wretched old blighter!" said Grandier indignantly.

"Do you realise that he is burying that poor girl alive with him, when she ought to be enjoying herself? Can't be more than seventeen, I suppose—possibly eighteen, but this 'Jersey Lily' way of doing the hair makes everybody under thirty look about fifteen. Haven't you noticed it?"

"Can't say I have. They all look just the same age as they always have to me."

"Oh, you!" with crushing contempt. "Well, she ought to be out, anyhow. But they read all winter and hunt all summer, so she says. She can stalk *markhor* for a whole day without getting tired—and such a little delicate thing, too!—and she has shot several bears. But I ask you, is that the life for a young lady?"

"Depends on the young lady. But I can see you're determined to rescue her from it, so to spare your feelings we'll make up our minds that she is simply asking to be rescued."

## CHAPTER III.

### THE BACK OF BEYOND.

"It seems a brutal thing to say," remarked Sir Robert slowly, "but when a man is as hopelessly short-sighted as Brancepath, I always have the feeling that it's no good expecting him to take common-sense views of anything."

For the interview with Mr Brancepath, the permanent official who had journeyed from Calcutta to Ranjitgarh to make Sir Robert acquainted with the sentiments of the Viceroy, had been unsatisfactory, even disquieting. Arthur and Grandier, who were present, had both conceived a hearty dislike for the envoy.

"You and he seemed to know one another, sir?" suggested Grandier.

"Yes, he was James Antony's secretary in the latter part of '57. Very small potatoes then, of course, but when Antony was Viceroy he got a departmental post close to him, and became his familiar spirit—what the French call his *âme damnée*. He must have kept pretty quiet under the last man, but now, of course, he is flourishing like a green bay-tree. But it's absurd to think that the prepossessions of two men out here can prevail against instructions from home—especially when both the Services and the whole community are against them too."

For Mr Brancepath had spoken as if he either were unacquainted with the British Government's change of

## England hath Need of Thee

front, or had passed it over as unworthy of notice. Hearing him, any one would have thought Sir Robert's mission was merely a preliminary to the evacuation of Pahar.

"Perhaps it's just that the wish is father to the thought, sir," said Arthur, anxious to cheer his uncle.

"Unfortunately the wish of a government has a way of getting itself translated into facts out here. I didn't like the way Brancepath spoke of the advance of the Granthistan troops to Raiyati."

It appeared that the plans of the Government of India for establishing amicable relations with Sinim had been gravely imperilled by the movement of the Granthistan forces, which had thus rudely cut a knot that should have been carefully untied by diplomatic means. That the Bala army might have been wiped out in the interim did not seem to be worth considering. Sir Robert's expression of his earnest hope that the troops might remain at Raiyati while his mission was in progress did not meet with an actual refusal, but it seemed pretty evident that if the decision lay with Mr Brancepath they would be recalled.

"Has he any old grudge against you, sir?" asked Grandier.

"None that I know of. Lord Antony and I were always opposed on frontier questions, of course, and Brancepath followed Antony heart and soul. He must think that Antony's policy is being reversed almost before he is cold in his grave. But I imagine his stiffness just now sprang merely from our being not—what is it that ladies say of their husbands?—not congenial to one another. We really have very little in common."

"Then you think he's to be trusted, though he isn't friendly?"

"I should say so. I hope so. Why on earth shouldn't he be trustworthy?" demanded Sir Robert testily. "There's no conceivable reason why he should plot against the success of the Mission, even if that sort of thing was done nowadays. Of course

## The Back of Beyond

we shall feel the effect of the Simla madness—there's no doubt of that—there will be delays and slackness and no particular zeal to put things through. But I have had to do with that sort of thing before, and got round it somehow. Very likely it's merely that he sees he's beaten, and that makes him nasty."

Leaving Mr Brancepath's attitude unexplained, Sir Robert and his two subordinates, with the servants they had now gathered round them, journeyed on towards Bala. The places they passed were full of memories for him, especially Gajnipur, where he had wrestled with Sir James Antony in the Mutiny year, and come out conqueror. Thence one road led to Shah Bagh, which he had held against that doughty antagonist as well as against mutinous Sepoys and hostile tribesmen, and another to Elgin, the scene of his tempestuous wooing and his marriage. From Elgin another "road"—so-called, for the great Road linking up Bala-Tarin with the Empire had not yet been constructed—led towards Bala, and it was this that the Mission followed, on their way to pick up their escort at Sheonath, and thence to cross the icy passes to Pahar. The track was the most unroadlike possible, for even where its course was in normal times fairly marked, the storms and landslides of the winter just past had wrought havoc with it, and Grandier's professional skill was called into requisition several times a day to bring the expedition, with the unofficial travellers that had attached themselves to its heels, over yawning chasms or along the sides of sheer cliffs. Arthur lived in a kind of ecstasy of admiration, springing with alacrity to obey any order of his hero, and keeping a side-eye upon his uncle to make sure that he was properly appreciative of Grandier's exploits, blissfully unconscious the while that Sir Robert would have been quite equal to surmounting the difficulties for himself, though in a more rough and ready and less scientific way than the Royal Engineer.

On the borders of Bala Sir Robert turned aside for a moment to pay a visit to an old acquaintance, no

## England hath Need of Thee

As a personage than Murid-ud-din Begum, little Jock Arbuthnot's great-grandmother. It was a courtesy due to the widow of the last Mohammedan ruler of the state and the staunch friend of the English, and there was just the chance that the old lady might be able to throw some light on the whereabouts of the elusive Colonel Brown, who seemed to have disappeared into the void again since his meteoric visit to Ranjitgarh. It was clear that he lived in Bala in the winter and made hunting expeditions into Pahar in the summer, and this was no doubt the reason why none of the British sojourners in Bala—who in those days always left the country before the cold weather closed the passes—were able to indicate his dwelling-place. The *Times* letters offered no clue, since there was evidence that they had been written as a series, and despatched under one cover before winter began—possibly on the occasion of the Ranjitgarh visit.

The Begum Sahiba received her guest with immense pleasure, and with all the honour due to the survivor of a generation which she persisted in regarding as infinitely superior to the present one. The lady and he had not been on particularly good terms in the past, but it warmed Sir Robert's heart to sit on a highly uncomfortable chair in an apparently empty room, and sample gingerly, though with every appearance of complete enjoyment, various elaborate and dangerous-looking concoctions in the nature of sweetmeats, produced as an accompaniment to tea. Meanwhile, from behind a tightly stretched curtain of red silk which formed the fourth side of the room, a high-pitched feminine voice poured forth a torrent of questions, covering the health and present prosperity of, as it seemed, every European man and woman with whom the Begum had ever come in contact. Presents from Lady Charteris and Mrs Gerrard had been offered and—so Sir Robert was assured—laid on the recipient's head and eyes as having fallen direct from Heaven, and a little letter from Jock carefully translated—to the immense edification of a chattering

## The Ball of Beyond

crowd of women summoned behind the curtain to rejoice with their mistress in the news of her great grandson—and then handed over to her keeping, a treasure not less precious because unintelligible. Happily the old lady could not know that the boy had written merely as to an old friend of his father's, since his mother refused absolutely to allow him to be made aware of the relationship. When the attendants were dismissed again, exchanging paroxysms of rapture over the wisdom, affection, and learning of the young heir, the Begum swooped suddenly.

"And why has the Sahib not brought back to me the light of my eyes? When I heard them say, 'Chātar Sahib returns,' I thought, 'Now will he verily redeem his promise, and the grandson of my daughter will yet lay me in the grave.'"

"May that day be far distant—as surely indeed it is!" responded Sir Robert gallantly. "Of a truth, the boy is not yet old enough to return, nor will he be for eight or ten years to come."

"But when he returns, it will be as a warrior, one famous in battle, like his grandfather and great-grandfather?" demanded the voice jealously. Sir Robert hesitated.

"I have advised his mother to make a soldier of him, but the idea displeases her," he confessed. "Yet be sure that when he feels himself drawn to return hither, nothing will stay him, and there are other worthy occupations, even for a descendant of warriors."

The old lady read between the lines with uncanny swiftness what Sir Robert had felt it wiser to withhold, that Mrs Arbuthnot objected to her boy's being a soldier just because duty might take him to India. "It is well," she said. "This woman—the widow of my grandson—thinks to build a barrier across the course of her son's life, but when the summer comes, and the snow melts in the mountains, the waters will burst forth in spite of her, and sweep over the ruins of her work. She knows not, as the Sahib and I know, how the hills call to him whose fathers dwelt among



## England hath Need of Thee

them, so that he cannot choose but hear. I can wait."

"True," said Sir Robert sententiously. "As the young birds return to the nesting-places of their parents, so does the mountain man return to his hills, even after a generation or more of absence——" He had a brilliant inspiration here. "There is one for whom I am seeking, whose fathers were hillmen in Europe. It is told me that, never having seen his own land, he is come to dwell in these mountains in his old age."

He felt, though he could not see, a stir of interest behind the curtain, but the Begum's tone was studiously indifferent, even contemptuous. "I have heard of such an one, who is neither a true Sahib nor a man of this land, yet claims to sit among the great ones. 'I am no bird,' said the escaped *myna* which had been taught to speak; 'I am a *man*. Drive away the bird-people from my path!'"

"You speak of him whose daughter married Maharajah Jaswant Singh?"

"That was the tale, yet the Sarkar refuses to acknowledge the marriage." There was unholy joy in the old lady's voice. "The son of that union will never sit upon the *gaddi* at Agpur. Yet behold Istākis Sahib stiffening his neck as though he had the Great Lord Sahib for a son-in-law. 'The woman is no daughter of mine!' says he, though all men know the truth."

"Istākis?" said Sir Robert in perplexity, trying in vain to translate the word into any European name he knew. "Stocks?--Stacks?"

"So he calls himself, or lets men call him, feigning himself to be one of the mighty ones. Listen, sahib. It was told me that the man brought up in his house his brother's daughter, and that the maiden was fair to look upon, and of pure European blood, not such as his own daughter, whose mother was a Hindu from the plains. Now since the wise man is he who lays his plans far in advance, it was in my mind to make en-

quiries about this girl as a bride for my daughter's grandson, because the house of Agpur is allied with him who now rules in Bala, and it is well for a young man to gain powerful relatives by his marriage."

"But surely," said Sir Robert politely, threading with some difficulty the tortuous mazes of the Begum's domestic diplomacy, "in such a marriage there would be no advancement for the descendant of Murid-ud-din Khan?"

"Advancement? none!" cried the old lady furiously. "But expediency—much, for the protection of his lands against the greed of him who calls himself Rajah of Bala. But the Sahib says well that the marriage could only confer honour on the maiden's family, and but that she is of European blood it would never have entered my mind. But in weighing the matter, it seemed to me to have advantages, and desiring to act wisely, I sent a trusted person from my household to speak with the servants of Istākis Sahib and enquire into the conditions of the maiden. But evil was the day in which I chose out that son of a foolish mother for so responsible an errand, for the wretch, carried away by the importance of his mission, babbled of its true purport, and even represented himself as sent to arrange the marriage. The servants of Istākis Sahib ran to him hotfoot with the news, and the upstart, burning with delight in being able to insult his betters, fell upon that emissary of mine and drove him forth with blows and kicks, declaring, with such vilenesses as I will not repeat, that he would sooner marry his brother's daughter to the meanest of the Sarkar's *gorah-log*<sup>1</sup> than to the descendant of kings!"

"Truly the man is intemperate in his words. Yet do such insults injure none but him who utters them," said Sir Robert didactically. "Still——" after a sympathetic pause, "it may be that his violence has averted disaster, for it is not the custom of the English to accept wives chosen by others."

"Send me back my daughter's grandson, and leave

<sup>1</sup> European soldiers, lit. fair people.

## England hath Need of Thee

the matter to me," said the Begum, with such venomous determination that Sir Robert was really glad the boy was at a safe distance, lest he should find himself married, willy-nilly, to a kidnapped bride. "As for Istākis Sahib, I spit upon him. Lacking birth, he is devoid also of breeding."

"Then is he not to be pitied, since he lacked discernment to see the honour offered him? From your words, it seems to me that he is the man for whom I am looking, whose strange behaviour has made him a scorn to many."

"They may well scorn him! Many Sahibs travel in these mountains and hunt for their pleasure, but who ever heard of one that spent his life in hunting? Nor do any Sahibs turn aside to visit his house, as your honour has blessed this humble abode by lighting down before it. Without doubt he is an outcast from his people, condemned for some sin in youth to wear out his days in endless toilsome chasing of useless beasts."

The grapes were so clearly sour that Sir Robert put his next suggestion with some diffidence. "It is told me that the person I seek is solitary rather by choice than by necessity. I have looked for him in vain, and enquired in vain."

"Then your honour's search is at an end," said the Begum spitefully, "for my own servants shall lead you within sight of the man's house. Doubtless he has his reasons for avoiding discovery, and it is his evil fate that enables me to baulk him. Every week do his messengers come down to fetch his *dāk*, and the track they make is clearly to be seen. Let the Sahib consider himself as already there."

Sir Robert expressed his gratitude, less to the Begum's intentions than to her action, and the next day he and Arthur, with two servants, followed the lead of a ragged regiment of the old lady's retainers into the mountains, leaving Grandier at the camp to wrestle with the apportionment of loads to pack-animals and porters. It was not surprising that

Istākīs Sahib had succeeded in evading the notice of the many British sojourners in Bala, for these all followed a well-defined, if chaotic route, leading direct into the Happy Valley, whereas the track shown by the Begum's servants led up a narrow side-ravine which looked no more than a torrent-bed. The Englishmen were soon obliged to dismount and lead their horses, and even then it was only with great difficulty that they made their way along the slippery ledges and between masses of rock which a touch would dislodge. The roughness of the track promised little comfort at its end, and it was an agreeable surprise when the leader of the tattered guides pausing dramatically on a shelving platform of rock poised precariously above a rushing stream, indicated as "The house of Istākīs Sahib!" a long low wooden building, rather in the Swiss style, some distance further down on the face of the opposite cliff. He and his fellows seemed to consider that no further guidance was needed, for they turned back into the ravine, alleging that their mistress's *izzat* (dignity) would be wounded if they went on; but when Sir Robert had distributed the requisite largess among them, and began to descend the slope, it seemed as though the difficulties of the task were only beginning. Even when the foot of the cliff was reached, it was obviously impossible to cross the torrent without a bridge, and none was visible. Sir Robert and his nephew glanced at one another in humorous perplexity not unmixed with exasperation, their servants looking on impassively without putting forward any suggestion. They were ready to go where they were told, but it was for their masters to provide the means.

"The people who live up there must get across somehow," said Sir Robert. "We must try and attract their attention."

He and Arthur shouted in unison, and received an unexpected answer. Out of the low sparse bushes on the opposite bank, only some thirty feet from them, rose a tall gaunt man, so tall that it seemed impossible

## England hath Need of Thee

he should have concealed himself there, and advancing to the edge, bowed with great politeness. His long grey whiskers and deerstalker cap gave him something the look of a French caricature of an Englishman, and he was clothed from head to foot in the dark tartan of a famous regiment cut in semi-military style—tunic and trows.

"I wish you a very good day, sir!" the words sounded distinctly above the roar of the stream. "I have the honour of addressing General Sir Robert Charteris? I have waited for you here the whole of yesterday and to-day."

"Sir, you are very good," Sir Robert shouted back, not to be outdone in politeness. "May I suggest that with a little assistance from you I might have got here sooner?"

The man in tartan laughed—the noise of the torrent made it a soundless laugh, which was weird in the extreme. "Not at all, sir—not at all. If you ain't too proud to seek me out, all I have is at your service, but not a step do I stir to offer my advice where it is not desired. Oblige me by following the bank fifty paces to your left."

It was useless to bandy words with a person accustomed to out-roar the rushing water, and Sir Robert and his nephew obeyed meekly.

"We've come to the right shop, sir, anyhow," said Arthur.

His uncle was meditating. "Istakis?" he said. "I have it!—Istakis—Iskātis—Scottish—that's how he gets the name. Well, my boy, this is a bit of a new experience for you, isn't it?"

"Hope the old chap don't expect us to swim the horses across," said Arthur, looking with some anxiety at the stream, but Colonel Brown was not so inhospitable. A curious-looking upright frame on his side of the water, now being manipulated by ropes in the hands of several stout coolies, crashed down where a projecting ledge of hard rock narrowed the width of the torrent to twenty feet or so, and revealed itself as a

rude drawbridge. The horses disliked the look of it extremely, and their objections rather spoiled the effect of Colonel Brown's advancing precisely to the middle of the bridge, there to announce his heartfelt pleasure in bidding Sir Robert Charteris welcome to Albin. The guests were too much occupied with their steeds to reply properly until they were on firm ground again, and their host, having superintended the raising of the bridge, turned to conduct them up the hill. The path was very little better than the track they had been following all day, but Colonel Brown made nothing of the difficulties, skipping up the rocks, as Arthur told Grandier later, like an elderly chamois—a feat impossible of emulation by his visitors, hampered by their led horses. The house was more than ever like a Swiss chalet when they reached it, with its long balconies and stone-laden roof, and Colonel Brown waved his hand casually at the landscape, which comprised a fine panorama of assorted rocks and ravines, with the remark that you could imagine yourself in Switzerland with no trouble at all. Without waiting for an answer, he gave the horses and servants into the charge of several natives who seemed to spring out of the ground at his call, and led his guests across the verandah and into a large bare room with low bookshelves all round it and the upper part of the walls lavishly decorated with heads and horns. The floor was strewn with skins, but all the comfort of the place seemed to have concentrated itself about the huge fireplace, which had a brick-built chimney-corner and two high-backed settles, making it almost a little room in itself. It was only in keeping with the incongruities of the place to find a comfortable elderly lady, in a shabby black gown and a lace cap, sitting knitting beside a tea-table, while a girl standing beside her turned quickly at the entrance of the strangers, and Arthur recognised the truth of Grandier's assertion, that she blushed and sparkled both at once. Colonel Brown waved his hand at the ladies as he had done at the landscape.

## England hath Need of Thee

"Our good friend Miss Travis, who does her best to keep us in the way we should go, and my niece Noel," he said brusquely. "Sit down, sit down, Sir Robert, and you too, young sir. Now, Noel, make yourself useful."

"Pray allow me," said Arthur quickly, reading a signal of distress in the faint contraction of the elder lady's forehead, and the girl laughed happily as she sat down.

"It feels so grand to be waited on!" she said, as Arthur handed her scones, only to have the dish reft from him by Colonel Brown, who was clearly of opinion that the guests ought to be served first. Having supplied Sir Robert, who was trying to exchange a word or two with his hostess, he removed him promptly from the neighbourhood of the rest, and engaged him in an animated conversation. Miss Travis smiled bravely.

"When there is a gentleman kind enough to wait on us, Noel feels like a young lady instead of a little girl," she said, as she gave Arthur his cup. "Oh, not there, please!" as he stepped back hastily. What had looked like a low ottoman, on which he was about to seat himself, suddenly moved, and proved to be the largest black cat he had ever seen, occupying a footstool nicely calculated to its size. He recovered himself creditably.

"What would have happened if I had sat upon him?" he asked, selecting a safer place on the settle.

"Fireworks!" said Noel. Miss Travis looked grieved.

"Poor Bumpus is very sweet-tempered," she said, as the great cat banged his head against her caressing hand with a vigour that showed how he came by his name. "He likes you, Mr Gerrard. It is a great compliment. Isn't it wonderful how the dear things know who is to be trusted?"

Bumpus, standing on his hind-legs, was proceeding to sharpen his claws on Arthur's knee—an attention distinctly less agreeable to the recipient than it.

evidently was to himself. Miss Travis beamed, and Noel laughed her clear, rippling laugh, as her glance and Arthur's met. He found her eyes—great eyes, now brown and now liquid grey, like water in a running brook—upon him several times while Miss Travis rehearsed a short history of Bumpus and his wonderful doings, and they always said, "You are young too, and all these people are so old! I wonder if you are on my side?" The effect on one who had never dreamt of considering whether he was young or old was curiously moving. It gave him the feeling that he shared a secret with this unknown girl.

"The servants are dreadfully afraid of him," Miss Travis prosed gently on. "They call him 'the Europe cat,' and think I must have fed him on English bread to make him grow so big."

"Nonsense, Travy darling! You know perfectly well that they think he is a magic cat—your familiar spirit," said Noel. "Do you know that Bumpus has a special porter to himself when we move up to Pahar for the summer, Mr Gerrard?"

"But do you all go?" asked Arthur, astonished, for Miss Travis did not look as though hunting expeditions on the Roof of the World were in her line. "How on earth——?"

A hunted look crossed poor Miss Travis's face. "Sometimes I ride—on a yak," she admitted. "But part of the way I am carried in a chair, on the back of a porter."

"That must be—awfully jolly," said Arthur vaguely, with a strong feeling that it must be rather dreadful for the porter.

"Darling Travy shuts her eyes hard, and holds tight," said Noel; "and I skip about among the rocks and drop stones on her, to make her think there's an avalanche. But she loves it when we get to Pahar."

"Of course she does, if you go too," said Arthur, with a tremendous effort that made him red—so he felt—all over. The girl laughed with delight.

"Oh, that's a compliment!" she cried. "Do you



## 42 England hath Need of Thee

always pay compliments, like people in books? like——” she stopped suddenly, and he saw that she was blushing like a rose. In pure anxiety to spare her confusion he uttered the first thing that came into his head.

“Oh, you must talk to my friend Grandier if you want compliments. He’s with us on this business, so you’ll see him soon. By the bye, he met you at Ranjitgarh last cold weather, didn’t he——” he stopped suddenly, appalled. The girl was crimson, face and neck and ears. He did not know where to look.

“I am afraid we are not very fond of remembering that visit to Ranjitgarh,” said Miss Travis, in her kind voice. “We were such terribly country cousins, you see. Living out here at the back of beyond, how can we know what is being worn? I know I felt like a painted savage.”

The association of ideas was so incongruous that Arthur laughed involuntarily. “Was it a pleasant feeling?” he asked.

“Most unpleasant,” said Miss Travis emphatically. “I never want to experience it again. Now can you tell us anything about clothes and what people are wearing?”

“Not a scrap,” said Arthur honestly. “My sister says I don’t know the difference between a Princess bonnet and a polonaise. It’s not quite as bad as that, though, for I know you wear a bonnet on your head, and I don’t believe you do the other thing.”

“Oh, have you a sister?” The girl had recovered herself, though the flush still lingered in her face, and she spoke eagerly. “Is she coming with you to Pahar?”

“Rather not! Why, no one dreamed ladies could go there at all. Besides, my sister has got a husband and two little girls—jolliest kids you ever saw!”

“Oh dear! I did hope——” she murmured; but Colonel Brown, gesticulating vigorously with his empty teacup, approached them in his eager talk with Sir Robert, and drowned her voice.

“Sending you to Sheonath is all nonsense. You

"come with me, and I'll engage to get you to Pahar in less time and by a far easier route. Discovered it myself."

"Thanks; I fear I am booked for a consultation with the Bala authorities. But it won't take long."

"All waste of precious time. Cut it out, Sir Robert, and trust yourself to me. We'll start for Pahar to-morrow!"

"Rather hard on the ladies," said Sir Robert. "At least, I presume you don't leave them alone here?"

"Not I!" cried Colonel Brown explosively. "Fine mischief they would get into, I'll warrant!"

"We really are accustomed to these sudden changes of plan," said Miss Travis, with a deprecating look up at the guest. "It is a little trying, as you say, Sir Robert, but then think how good it is for us not to get too comfortable and settled anywhere here!"

Sir Robert discerned in the words a covert reproof to the Colonel, but he was to learn he had done Miss Travis injustice. She was a professional optimist, with a gift for extracting consolation from the most unpromising materials.

## CHAPTER IV.

## COLONEL BROWN ACTS WITH DECISION.

COLONEL BROWN was the soul of hospitality. As soon as he heard Grandier had been left at the camp, he insisted on sending a messenger to bring him to Albin the next day, saying, rather surprisingly, that he had been most favourably impressed with him at Ranjitgarh. Sir Robert offered no objection, for though he had only intended to spend one night at the house in the hills, he found there was ample employment for two days in Colonel Brown's stores of memoranda. Notes on the history and geography of Pahar, its natural products and possibilities, its various peoples and their relation to one another, the characters of different members of the ruling family, and the unfortunate circumstances connected with it which had combined with the threat of British withdrawal to reduce the country to its present unhappy condition—these would have filled several volumes had they been arranged in order, but they were in a state of the wildest confusion. Written on scraps of paper of all sorts and sizes, or even on the margins of books, the notes enshrined an immense amount of information, but all the items were jumbled together and totally unclassified. With callous disregard for his guest's eyesight, Colonel Brown refused to allow Arthur to be called in for a preliminary weeding-out. It seemed that he had some idea of writing a great book on Pahar, and

he could not but fear that his valuable material might be prematurely communicated to the world. Behold, then, poor Sir Robert, eyeglasses firmly fixed on nose, groping among masses of dusty and discoloured fragments of paper, his host making confusion worse confounded by seizing every now and then upon some cherished scrap of manuscript and embarking upon a long dissertation concerning its contents.

For Arthur his autocratic host provided occupation without the pretence of consulting his tastes. A quantity of fishing-tackle was thrust upon him, together with the services of a stalwart dark-skinned highlander, who he was assured would conduct him to an excellent pool for mahseer. Arthur had no liking whatever for fishing—it was far too solitary a pursuit for so gregarious a person—and he would much have preferred a mountain scramble with Miss Brown. But she had not appeared this morning—he had dark suspicions that her uncle had kept her out of sight till he was disposed of—and Miss Travis, of whom he did catch a glimpse among the huts on the hill behind the house, was so clearly absorbed in wrestling with the iniquities of the servants and their families that it would have been cruel to distract her attention. Therefore Arthur fished with great vigour—possibly excessive vigour, since he caught nothing—until his gillie, after watching him with a contemptuous eye for some time, was good enough to go to sleep. Then he sat down, and fished after the manner of small boys fishing for minnows in ponds, letting his line dangle peacefully from the rod, but without their keen expectation of results. Free from the toil of pretending to do something, he scanned the confused masses of rock which towered before him, and wondered once more what on earth could have induced any presumably sane man to set up housekeeping here, and to drag ladies into the wilds with him. He was whistling meditatively when a voice from behind him made him jump.

“I do wish you were a girl!” it said, just loud

## England hath Need of Thee

enough to reach his ears, but too low to disturb the slumbers of the gillie, lulled by the roaring waters above the pool.

"I don't!" he said stoutly, craning his head round to find Noel seated in a niche of the rocks behind him. "Girls have a perfectly awful time."

"Do you say that because you *know*, or just because it seems so to you?"

"Oh, I say!" helplessly, "how can I tell? Look here, do you mind coming a little nearer? My neck isn't made of indiarubber, and I suppose I must go on fishing, as your uncle sent me here to do it."

"Fishing!" she laughed. "Of course you must go on 'fishing.' But you needn't look round. I had much rather you didn't."

"No tricks, then!" said Arthur quickly. "No make-believe avalanches on me, you know!"

"I thought you were grown-up!" said Miss Brown, with cruel distinctness.

"So did I. Anything happened to make you think otherwise?"

"I think you are a schoolboy," she retorted cuttingly. Then her tone changed. "Oh, why are we squabbling like this, when I do so terribly want to talk? I wish you were a girl, because then you would understand."

"Understand what?"

"Things. Everything. Do you know anything about girls?"

"Not a thing. Poor but honest. If you want a fellow who knows all about girls——" the inevitable reference to Grandier was on his lips, but he remembered in time that burning blush the evening before, and turned aside. "But always ready to learn, I promise you."

"If you were a girl, you would understand how one longs and longs to talk, and how one goes on for years and years, and still there's nobody to talk to."

"So bad as all that? But you have Miss Travis. Seems an awfully decent old girl."

## Colonel Brown acts with decision 49

"Travy is a darling. But Uncle got her from an asylum, you know."

"What!" cried Arthur in consternation.

"Not a lunatic asylum, stupid! An orphan asylum. Can you guess why she left it?"

"I don't know. Because she was too kind, and spoiled the orphans?"

"Oh no. I believe it was because the orphans revolted. Just think; when any one wants to do anything, she says, 'But, my dear, that would be wrong!' or 'But, my dear, surely that is a foolish thing to do!' and she expects you not to want to do it any more. Could you stand that if you were an orphan? It makes me want to do it just two thousand times as much."

"But this isn't an orphan asylum."

"Oh, she thinks it is, or it does instead, anyhow. Uncle and I are the orphans, and she tries—awfully gently and nicely—to teach Uncle manners, and he always says, poor dear, that he has had to learn manners out of books, and he always forgets them when he wants them most. And I have had to learn everything out of books—and they don't teach you right!"

There was a keen note of tragedy in her voice, and Arthur muttered encouragingly, "Awfully hard luck!"

"About clothes, now," with intense injury. "Uncle gets all sorts of magazines—great uninteresting things—sent out to him, but there was a beautiful article in one once. It said that the days of the foolish following of frivolous fashions were over, and we were getting back to the simple lines and exquisite fabrics of the past. And it said particularly that the girl of the present day need no longer affront the eye with the tied-back skirt, the spoon-shaped train, the dress-improver and the curled fringe, but could present herself in the delightful guise of some youthful queen of romance—an Isabel, a Violante. I didn't know then what all the things were that they talked about, but it sounded so delightful to be able to dress like people in books,

## 48 England hath Need of Thee

and yet be in the fashion, and there were plenty of pictures——”

“I know.” Arthur was rejoiced to be able to show intelligent comprehension. “Lots of pictures of ‘em in *Punch*—awfully funny! Æsthetes they call them, and guys they are, and no mistake. Go about hugging teapots, and carrying broken lilies in their hands.”

A gasp behind him spoke of dismay. “*Punch*? But that is comic, isn’t it?” with the exaggerated stress on the word which seemed the result of revulsion from the even tones of Miss Travis. “But I meant pictures in real books—poetry, history. Don’t you see, if you could dress like a historical picture, you needn’t mind about fashions. You would be all right whatever you wore. And I had felt so uncomfortable about going to Ranjitgarh—because of my clothes. Why, do you know, Uncle gets this plaid stuff out from Scotland by the piece, and the *dirzee* makes it into suits for him and frocks for me. Such frightful frocks they used to be—just plain, with the body sewn on to the skirt!”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” confessed Arthur. “But it sounds awfully horrid,” he added obligingly.

“Well, after reading that article, I copied Helen Macgregor’s dress in *Rob Roy*. This is it.” Arthur turned round, and for the first time studied her attire with care. She wore a full pleated skirt of the tartan like a kilt, and a tight-fitting black velvet jacket. A velvet cap with an eagle’s feather was perched jauntily on her head.

“Looks all right,” he said diffidently.

“But it isn’t!” she cried, almost with tears. “You would know at once if there were any other girls here. And Travy let me have her own precious velvet skirt to cut up for the jacket and cap. But at the ball it was worse—much worse. Of course I knew old Nasr-Ullah hadn’t got my dress quite as I meant it to be—not quite like the picture of Guinevere—but things never are *quite*, are they? But when we got to Ranjitgarh, and saw the ladies in the streets, I felt

## Colonel Brown acts with Decision 29

dreadful. Poor darling Travy was just as horrified as I was, for nobody's clothes were the least bit like mine. We did everything we could think of to my dress, and at last it seemed to us that it would do. I had meant to wear my hair hanging down in front in two plaits, like the picture, but there was a kind Eurasian girl in the hotel who helped me to do it up in the fashionable way. You can't *think* how I was looking forward to that ball! And when I got into the room, and saw all the people staring and laughing and pointing—I believe I should have *died* if it hadn't been—— It was as much as I could do to pretend not to see them."

"But what was wrong about your dress?" asked Arthur, with a genuinely sympathetic curiosity, which was promptly snubbed.

"Never mind. It doesn't signify. I crammed it into the fire and burned it when we got home. I don't want to think about it. It was *all* wrong. And I was all wrong, too. I didn't know how to behave. Uncle said so. He said I made myself and him the talk of the place. And if—people—were kind"—something suspiciously like a sob—"it was only—that they were sorry for me. And even Travy said didn't I think I had been a little unwise? But what *he* must be thinking of me—all this time——"

"I'm sure—nobody—would think anything but what was kind and—respectful." Would it be playing the game to reveal Grandier's confession? Arthur wondered. Even more important at the moment, would the revelation be well received?

"*Respectful*? pitiful, you mean! just what one hates. How would you like any one to think pitifully of you?"

"Well, perhaps he has never thought about you again," said Arthur, too anxious to console to remember that the suggestion was hardly flattering. But the girl caught at it.

"Oh, if I could only believe that! But no"—she almost wailed—"he was not like that. He asked



## England hath Need of Thee

me when we should meet again—and his voice showed——”

“Perhaps he didn’t mean it,” ventured Arthur, speculating whether it would be advisable to tell her what a liberal and constant worshipper at many shrines—it might almost be said at any shrine—Grandier was. But he was pretty certain that on this occasion it would be doing Grandier an injustice. After all, he had remembered this little girl from the wilds for over half a year, and had quite spontaneously expressed a strong desire to see her again. Bursting with the desire to comfort, Arthur turned impetuously. “But I say, you know, I don’t believe it’s that at all!” he assured the girl. “I believe he meant every word of it, and you will meet him again, and it will be every bit all right.”

To his extreme discomposure he met a look of haughty aloofness, though Noel’s face was crimson. “I knew you wouldn’t understand!” said an icy voice. “Any girl would. Why, I believe you think——!”

“No, no, I swear I don’t!” he assured her abjectly, though he was guiltily conscious that he had undoubtedly thought—— He felt her glance freezing the back of his head as she rose with dignity.

“I am going back to the house,” she said, with appalling chilliness. “I am sorry to have interrupted your ‘fishing.’”

“Noel!” exclaimed an astonished, not to say scandalized, voice, “what are you doing here?” Colonel Brown swung himself down the rocks, and stood glaring at his niece. “Go back to Miss Travis instantly, and see what she will say to you. It is not the first time I have had to speak to you about your forward behaviour, and you know it. The idea of thrusting yourself in where you were not wanted, and spoiling a morning’s sport!”

Had the old gentleman only known it, he was as near being knocked down at that moment as at any time in his life, but Arthur, guessing what the girl must be feeling, would not turn and look at him.

## Colonel Brown acts with Decision

"You are quite mistaken, sir," he said, catching his line feverishly to help him to steady his voice. "There were no fish to-day, and Miss Brown has very kindly helped me through what would have been an awfully dull morning. I was never so bored in my life——"

"Bored? dull? no fish? Stuff and nonsense!" The Colonel's anger was transferred in full measure from his niece to Arthur. "You young men of the present day"—the exordium was painfully familiar—"know nothing of real sport. Everything must be done for you—hey? Can't even hold a rod!"

"I shall be glad to take lessons from you, sir." This was painfully untrue, and as deservedly punished.

"Why, so you shall. I'll give you a lesson this very afternoon, as Sir Robert says he has letters to write. But no fish! A whole morning at the best pool in the river, and catch nothing—absolutely nothing! But come back to tiffin now."

Conscious of extreme mutual disapproval, they climbed the rocks to the house, and Colonel Brown's wrath continued to simmer throughout the meal, occasionally finding vent in violent expressions of disgust, addressed to nobody in particular. Noel, fetched forcibly, so Arthur guessed, from her room to the table by her uncle's command, was too near the verge of tears to venture on a word, and it fell to Sir Robert and his nephew to keep up what conversation they might with Miss Travis, who made anxious signs with her eyebrows when Colonel Brown was looking the other way and rating one of the servants, to inform them that when he was in a mood like this it was best to let him alone. A welcome interruption, as far as most of the party were concerned, occurred when Grandier walked in, and relieved the strained situation by his cheerful unconsciousness. All might have gone well if the host had let him seat himself by Arthur as he intended, but Colonel Brown was one of those trying people who are never satisfied with any arrangement not of their own making, and insisted

on his coming round the table to sit beside Noel. Arthur had felt, without looking at her, that the girl was crimson and trembling, and as Grandier approached her with a pleasant greeting, she rose to her feet with a gasp which was almost a scream. Arthur just caught the hunted look in her eyes as Miss Travis put her arm round her and hurried her out of the room, and he glared at her unconscious uncle.

"Dear Noel is a little overdone," said Miss Travis apologetically to Sir Robert when she returned. Then the habit of truthfulness prevailed. "Over-wrought, perhaps I should say." Colonel Brown snorted.

"Overdone? nonsense! The girl is hysterical—simply hysterical, from staying indoors too much. Nothing like fresh air for keeping the mind in tone. Look at me!"

"There is nothing much to tempt any one out of doors here—especially a young lady," said Miss Travis, a little flush of indignation rising in her face. "Don't you agree with me, Sir Robert, that young people are all the better for interests and companionship?"

"Companionship? the path to destruction!" Colonel Brown took the words out of his guest's mouth. "As I have told you before, ma'am, while Noel is under my control, I keep her safe under my own eye. Afterwards—well, that won't be my business. You will be good enough to see that she spends the afternoon in the open air. I insist upon it."

"What an old Turk he is!" said Arthur indignantly to Grandier, when they found themselves alone together afterwards. "Did you ever see anything like it?"

"But what is it all about?" demanded his friend. "What have they been doing to the girl?"

"Hunting and harrying her, I suppose—I don't know. I can't make her out."

"You wouldn't. And yet it's simple enough, no doubt."

"Oh, no doubt!" said Arthur savagely. "But if he don't want her to exchange a word with a living soul,

as seems pretty clear from the way he chivied her this morning when she was talking to me, why on earth doesn't he make things pleasanter for her here? You noticed the same thing, you know."

"At Ranjitgarh? Well, to tell the truth, I have wondered now and then whether he was so anxious to keep every one from speaking to her, after all. But there would be no reason for keeping it up after he had once got you here, if it was the other thing. So it's a fair challenge."

"I don't know what you're driving at!" said Arthur, exasperated. "You know such a precious lot that you can't explain to other people, don't you?"

"Hullo! you a bit hysterical too? Fresh air's the cure—eh? Look here, let's sneak out and look for *chikor*, all by our little selves."

Arthur was more than willing, for Grandier's presence promised relief from the various perplexing questions which had been disquieting him since the morning, because it was impossible not to believe that when Grandier once gave his mind to a matter, it would come out all right. Accordingly they unpacked their guns without calling the servants, and left their rooms by the verandah, so as to avoid the hall, where their host might be lying in wait. But Colonel Brown had the advantage of knowing the construction of the house better than they did, and they found him at the top of the steps by which they had hoped to escape. He greeted them with enthusiasm.

"That's all right!" he said to Grandier. "Going to pick up a bird or two for supper, hey? My niece will go with you. But you don't want your gun," turning to Arthur. "You are going to have the fishing-lesson you asked me to give you—no other time for it. Now then, Noel, ain't you ready yet?"

Very colourless and pinched-looking, Noel made her appearance round the corner of the house, and with her, also dressed for walking, came Miss Travis, the sight of whom seemed to fill Colonel Brown with the liveliest indignation.

"Now if this don't beat all!" he exclaimed. "Didn't I hear you say, ma'am, that your rheumatism had troubled you so much that you didn't sleep all night?"

"I had some sleep—I must be thankful for that," she replied. "And I think, I hope, that a short walk—Noel is not fit for more—will really do me good."

"With rain threatening every minute? Nonsense, ma'am! go and get a nap, as a sensible lady of your age should, to make up for the loss of sleep, and leave Noel to me. Captain Grandier will take her no further than she ought to go, you may be sure of that, and you shan't be sacrificed."

"It would be no sacrifice," murmured poor Miss Travis, retiring unwillingly, and Noel went down the steps with Grandier like a victim going to execution, while Arthur accompanied his host in much the same spirit. The only alleviation of his case lay in the fact that when once they had arrived at the pool, and Colonel Brown had instructed him at length in his duties, the first sign of a bite so fired the instructor's enthusiasm that he grabbed the rod *harc'v* from his pupil and manipulated it himself. The fish escaped—because Arthur had not handed over the rod quickly enough, he was told; but Colonel Brown, oblivious of his educational intentions, settled down to avenge himself on its fellows. Save for the fear that any sudden movement might call attention to his existence, Arthur was as free as he had been in the morning, and contrived by slow degrees to edge away towards the rapid over which the water of the pool flowed lower down. He had nothing to do but throw twigs from the bushes into it, but that was better than sitting watching his tyrant, and he had a wild dream of slipping away altogether and getting back to the house to write home. But as his gaze wandered idly over the rocky cliffs on the other side of the stream, he saw Grandier and Noel some distance lower down. The girl was treading lightly the rugged path as one accustomed to rock-tracks, but it was clear that the

## Colonel Brown acts with Decision. 55

pretence of *chikor*-shooting had been forgotten. Grandier's gun was slung on his shoulder, and Arthur's momentary intention of waving his arm and calling out was laid aside when he saw how earnestly he seemed to be talking. They came to a sudden fall in the track—a drop of two or three feet. Grandier let himself down, and held out his arms to receive the girl. Her slight hesitation was quite perceptible to Arthur, but she lowered herself lightly, and Grandier caught her. In the act of doing so he snatched a kiss.

Arthur turned his eyes away, horrified to realise that he had been spying on the lovers. As he did so, they met the well-pleased gaze of Colonel Brown, whose approach had been drowned by the noise of the torrent. He had no leisure even to rebuke Arthur for his desertion.

"I will leave you to try by yourself now," he said. "Don't forget what I told you about the turn of the wrist," and without further apology he was off in the direction of the drawbridge. Arthur's spirit was hot within him, and as the only means of defiance at his disposal, he promptly gathered up his tackle and returned with all possible speed to the house. There he tried hard to bury himself in a letter to his mother, but since his letters always dealt with hard facts, and that in the briefest style imaginable, he found it difficult to write when none of the facts that filled his mind at the moment could possibly be detailed. Involuntarily he glanced up when feet on the verandah passed his window, and caught a momentary glimpse of Colonel Brown, looking puffed up with pride, and Noel, moving like an automaton and apparently too much exhausted even to look round. Presently Grandier came into the room, and throwing himself into a chair, uttered a vigorous monosyllable.

"Why, what's up?" Arthur looked round with discreet surprise.

"Oh, nothing much. We're engaged, that's all."  
"Engaged—already?" in astonishment. Then,

recollecting himself, "Oh yes, of course! I ought to have known. You see, I couldn't help seeing," he explained haltingly.

"Oh, you saw too, did you? Anybody else, I wonder?" He ruminated angrily for a while, and then burst out, "I tell you what, girls have no business to be brought up so innocent. Give you my word, when I just—well, anybody would have done it—she cried fit to break her heart, and all I could get out of her was, What I must think of her to do such a dreadful thing!"

"But when you were engaged!" cried Arthur.

"Oh, but we weren't engaged then," grimly. "That didn't happen until Uncle appeared on the scene. 'I think you have something to say to me?' says he, and put it to me pretty plain what he expected it to be."

"But you don't mean—that you didn't want to be engaged—and you let him bully you into it?"

"What else was there to be done when he told me that since September she had thought and dreamt of nothing and nobody but me? And the girl hearing it all, mind you, and shrieking out, 'No, no!' A man can't—"

"No, of course not," said Arthur hastily. "Old Brown ought to be scragged. But what an awful— And you neither of you care for one another?"

"That's not the point. As a matter of fact, I had every intention of asking her to marry me some day. I told you as much—told you it wasn't just the ordinary thing. And she's all right too, of course. Naturally she had to deny it when the thing was put baldly like that—any woman would. But she'll soon come round when she knows it's all right. I believe the old blighter had been teasing her about me—for when we were walking together she winced at everything I said as if I had been sticking pins into her. And now she won't look at me or speak to me— Pretty cheerful, isn't it? But what I do bar is that old ruffian's flattering himself that he has brought me to book and made me marry his niece. Of course one wouldn't wish to

## Colonel Brown acts with Decision. 37

visit it upon the poor girl, but it's a beastly sort of thing to happen to one."

"But you don't mean you'll be married at once?"

"Not likely! In the middle of this business? Sir Robert would have a word to say. What I'm afraid of is that he mayn't even like my getting engaged. I never dreamed of asking her yet. But if he cuts up rough I'll turn him on to dear Uncle. Serve the old brute right!"



## CHAPTER V.

## THE PASSAGE PERILOUS.

SIR ROBERT did not like the engagement at all. To Noel herself he had no objection—indeed, he was so heartily sorry for her that he could but be glad there was a prospect of her being transferred from her uncle's to a gentler guardianship. But he was firm in insisting that the engagement was not to be made public until the Mission had returned, or been transformed into a permanent occupation of Pahar. To Arthur the decision seemed needlessly cruel, and he intimated as much to his uncle.

"It's not as if Grandier would let it come between him and his duty," he objected. "He never would."

"He had better not!" said Sir Robert grimly. "He would find himself back in India in double quick time if he did."

"But then why——?" persisted Arthur.

"For two reasons. One is that we are going to Central Asia, and for all we know among a precious set of fanatics. If the Paharis are anything like the Gamara people, you may be quite sure they would misunderstand things. Hang it, my boy! you must know by this time how the Mohammedans look upon our ways even in India, where they see plenty of 'em. In Pahar the situation might be not merely scandalous, but dangerous."

"I see. Filthy-minded brutes!"

"Exactly. Just keep in mind that they are filthy-

mindless brutes, and it may be safer for all of us. The other reason is our worthy host."

"Oh, you've found him out too, sir?"

"I am not precisely deaf and blind. The man has never had the benefit of being kicked at school or disciplined in the mess. Consequently he is an outrageous old ruffian, and the only excuse for his behaviour is that the loss of his daughter may have turned his brain a bit. As I see it, he has a mania to get his niece married, or at least engaged, to a European, so as to avoid the risk of another native alliance. Grandier seems to have walked into the trap."

"Trap!" burst from Arthur.

"I am not reflecting upon Miss Brown. One can only pity the unfortunate little creature, and feel thankful she is getting into good hands. But you can hardly deny that the attentions Grandier paid her at Ranjitgarh, slight as they were, gave old Brown a handle against him, and have enabled him to precipitate the engagement, which I'm sure I hope will end in a very happy marriage. But meanwhile, I don't want the Mission identified with Brown. I haven't a doubt he has raged from one end of Pahar to the other, and is probably well known as the *Mast Hathi*<sup>1</sup> Sahib, or something of the sort, all over Central Asia. He must have made enemies everywhere, but they needn't necessarily be our enemies. My business is to enquire into things dispassionately—not look at them through Brown's spectacles, and so see 'em red. I have no wish to give the man the cold shoulder—his notes have been extraordinarily useful to me, and as an authority on the passes and the lie of the country he must be hard to beat—but he must keep his place, not put himself forward as if he was one of us. If it was once generally known that my secretary was to marry his niece, everybody would be absolutely certain he was deep in my confidence."

"I see," said Arthur slowly. "So, though it seems awfully hard upon them——"

<sup>1</sup> Wild elephant.

## 60 England hath Need of Thee

"No hardship at all. Grandier has no business to be thinking of marrying on active service, and the girl is only just out of the nursery. I told Brown it would be far better to give her a year at a good school in the Hills than to drag her with him to Pahar, but he wouldn't hear of that. It seems it was at school that his daughter began the clandestine correspondence which ended in her elopement, and he considers it was the school's fault. So whatever wanderings he inflicts on his niece, she must grin and bear it for the present."

"Pretty rough on her, to have to put up with the old blackguard!"

"Well, if you ask me, Miss Brown seems more than satisfied—really relieved by the arrangement. I was quite struck by the reasonable way in which she took my objection."

"Not satisfied with the postponement!" protested Arthur vehemently. "Satisfied to have got Grandier, of course,"—his views resembled regrettably those of Thrums in some respects—"any girl might well be."

"My dear Arthur, I am quite aware that Grandier is all that could be wished in mind, body, and estate. You have dinned it into me—and if he wasn't, Brown would hardly be so anxious for him as a nephew-in-law. Let us hope Miss Brown sees him in the same light, and leave it at that."

Arthur was not satisfied—how could he be?—but he succeeded in assuring himself that it was better the poor little girl should be able to take things quietly, instead of breaking her heart over the prohibition. Of course it was the absolute confidence she had in Grandier that enabled her to receive Sir Robert's fiat so submissively, and it really looked as though she might yet prove almost worthy even of him.

"I say, I do hope you'll be awfully happy," Arthur said to her the next morning when the visitors were departing. "I do congratulate you most awfully." His heart was warm, but his vocabulary limited.

"I'm sure you do," she replied calmly, with what he

could not help suspecting to be the slightest possible tinge of scorn. "Thank you so much. It's exactly what I should have expected of you."

"I say, if I was a girl, should I understand that?" he asked. He was conscious of a distinct sense of disappointment, for her eyes no longer claimed alliance with him as they had done two days ago. Their friendly look had become one of indifference, almost of dislike. Of course it was natural enough that, having Grandier, she should not care to waste her time on any one else, but Arthur's kindly soul declined to be satisfied with the explanation. Because he was Grandier's friend he ought to be hers too. That was what he had always proposed to himself, and it was hard that she should dispose otherwise.

"Oh dear, no! You would have understood all along," she answered, and turned to bid farewell to Grandier with equal calmness and even less emotion. Arthur thought as they rode away that if all girls were like that, he was more than ever glad he was not one. Anybody might have thought she was sick of them both.

The Mission met with no particular adventures on its way to Sheonath, where it picked up Dr Lakeney and a subaltern named Harmar—a curiously thin, bronzed fellow with watchful eyes—in charge of the twenty men of the Trackers, ten sowars and ten sepoys, who were to form the escort. Sir Robert conferred with the Bala authorities, who were in a state of considerable confusion and nervousness as to the British Government's intentions with regard to Pahar, and reassured them as far as the scope of his instructions permitted, impressing upon them at the same time the absolute necessity of maintaining their military dispositions on the Sinite border. From Sheonath he and his companions journeyed, first by boat and then with hired horses, to Kok in Further Bala, where the expedition proper was to begin. It was fortunately still so early in the season that the mountains were not passable by caravans, though messengers had got across

## England hath Need of Thee

to inform the Khan of Pahar of the honour intended him, and returned with his warm welcome for the Mission, for there was much to settle before the start could be made. The transport arrangements were under the charge of a native *caravanbashi*, a gentleman of infinite accomplishment and also of infinite wile. Grandier and Arthur both flattered themselves that after six or seven years of India they were able to cope with any amount of ordinary rascality, and Harmar and the Doctor were certain that even the deeper branches of the subject were open books to them, thanks to their experience of a native regiment and of the elusive patient respectively, but all four were mere children in the hands of the Caravanbashi. Sir Robert, whose spirits rose joyfully on recognising the tricks he had met and vanquished as a subaltern in a frontier district forty years before, was the only person who could meet him on equal terms. It was explained that the unfortunate Pahari ponies which had been collected and bought in large numbers for the use of the Mission must be thoroughly well fed for a fortnight or so before starting, so as to lay up a store of strength in view of the hardships of the journey, and the Caravanbashi had devised a scale of diet for them about equal in cost to molten gold. Sir Robert, with a knowledge of the customs of the place for which his employé had not given him credit, bought a large field of clover and turned the ponies into it. There they luxuriated to their fill until the time came for the start, when the field—minus the clover crop—was sold back to the original owner. After this the Caravanbashi himself must have had misgivings as to the success of his famous deception with regard to the number of ponies actually paid for. He preferred to parade them in the street, where he could utilise the same animals two or three times over, on the principle of the stage army, but this incurably suspicious Elchi Beg insisted on inspecting and counting them all in the field. The Caravanbashi had just sufficient spirit left to try the same trick with the warm clothes provided for the

servants and grooms, trusting that the inspection might not be so thorough, as to disclose the absence of a sheepskin-lined coat here, and warm gloves, leggings, cap or boots there. When this also failed, he gave Sir Robert best with an excellent grace, and submitted quietly to a system of checks and inspections which must have rasped his very soul. The servants, over whose equipment the crowning battle had raged, displayed no feeling of any kind. Presumably they were glad to be assured of adequate protection against the fearful cold before them, but on the other hand, it was quite possible that each man was to have received a suitably infinitesimal share of the Caravanbashi's proposed gains.

At last the passes were declared practicable by the guides engaged, and the Mission left Kok, encumbered, of course, with a tail of people who had no connection with it, but sought its protection, or at any rate its company, for the journey. The experiences of the next fortnight were not agreeable. The route was a continuous succession of ascents and descents, with an occasional glacier to make it worse, or a tableland to make it better. For crossing the actual passes the travellers rode on yaks hired from wandering tribesmen of the neighbourhood, which grunted their way uphill with devastating slowness, but made up for lost time by going downhill quite alarmingly fast. When the weather was fine there was a horrible wind which contrived to chill all warmth and moisture simultaneously out of the human frame; when it was foul, storms of snow and sleet rendered it impossible to see a foot before one, and made the track like a toboggan-slide, so that several wretched ponies missed their footing and rolled to destruction down the slippery rocks. The hangers-on declared that they were dying of cold and hunger, and unblushingly demanded food, fuel, and warm garments, on the ground that they were clinging to the skirts of the Elchi Beg, though they admitted freely that when they asked permission to come they had declared they were equipped with all

necessaries. White men and natives of India alike suffered horribly from mountain sickness, and the nights—which might seem to promise rest from the constant pressing-on against the torpor induced by the cold—were one long torture, endured in the *yurtes*, or round felt tents of the tribes, in which you could not be warm however closely you pressed together, since, owing to the high altitude, the stoves were almost useless for producing a satisfactory heat or preparing palatable food. It was Arthur who woke Grandier one night, when they had shivered themselves to sleep, by suddenly sitting up and demanding, "I say, do you think old Brown is making poor Miss Travis and Miss Noel go through all this?" Grandier flung a boot at him—with a spur on it—and vouchsafed no answer.

Delightful was the descent of the final pass—in spite of the vagaries of the yaks—since it could be seen that in front lay merely foothills, and no more mountains. Here was the frontier of Pahar, and here the Mission was met by a high officer of state, and a *Yuzbashi*, or captain, with his company of soldiers, sent from Khamish, the capital, with assurances of the Khan's eagerness to welcome the Elchi Beg. The proper thing would have been to send one of his sons, but this was impossible owing to the unfortunate circumstances of the reigning family, with which Sir Robert was already acquainted through Colonel Brown. The present Khan of Pahar was only the third of his line, his grandfather—the Great Khan—having wrested the country from Sinim by hard fighting, and his father—the Wise Khan—consolidated the state by a strong frontier policy and prudent measures of social reform. It had seemed to Pahari society a Machiavellian stroke of policy when the Wise Khan, to conciliate two important nobles who were inclined to be obstreperous, had married his son to a daughter of each at practically the same time, promising that the son first born to either of the ladies should be heir to the throne.

Such an unfortunate coincidence as the birth of a son to each on the same day had not occurred to him as possible, but this was what happened—and in both cases during the first minute of the first hour of the day—so the faithful partisans of the respective wife averred. Fortunately for the interests of truth, the preceding day was an unlucky day, on which no prince with any desire for prosperity could afford to be born, and therefore no attempt was made to throw the date further back, but things were quite bad enough as it was. Which of the two youths, Ismail Beg or Aga Mohammed Beg, was entitled to the position of heir-apparent and the style of Beg Kuli Beg, and which of them must sink into obscurity under the honourable, but purely honorific, title of Haq Kuli Beg? The household of each wife swore till all was blue that the rival heir had not been born till at least six hours later than their own claimant, and the ladies themselves lavished money and jewellery on soothsayers, wandering dervishes, and guardians of famous shrines, to obtain an authoritative decision on behalf of their respective sons. But no decision seemed authoritative to the Khan. He received a strong pronouncement in favour of Ismail Beg uttered by a dervish who had not washed for fifty years otherwise than in sand, read it, and laid it thoughtfully side by side with a horoscope drawn by a noted astrologer far away in Sinim which proved that the safety of Pahar, and the Khan's own life, was bound up with the succession of Aga Mohammed Beg—and did nothing. His indecision might seem pitiable, but there was a good deal of method in it. In their present state of enmity his sons were not likely to combine to get rid of him, and should either of them be so unwise as to put him out of the way, the whole Khanate would immediately come down solid on the side of the other. Thus the Khan left the question undecided, and knowing that neither of his sons durst be too troublesome for fear of being disinherited, enjoyed himself in his own way with an



extremely disreputable circle, while the reins of government remained in the hands of the Dadkhwah, or prime minister, a faithful servant bequeathed to the Khan by his father.

It was from the Dadkhwah, Niaz Beg, that the officials really came who bore the Khan's greetings to Sir Robert. They were strictly charged by the old statesman, whose heart was filled with foreboding for the future of his country, to find out whether the Elchi was acquainted with the state of affairs, or at least whether he was willing to be instructed upon it. But Sir Robert knew already that while Ismail Beg stoutly championed the *status quo*, even to an extent that had made him to be looked coldly on at court, Aga Mohammed Beg and his mother leaned to the side of Sinim, and had visions of a reduction of armaments and a frontier guaranteed by the larger power. The ambassadors opened their hearts to him freely when they realised how much he knew, and he learned more than even Colonel Brown could tell him of the power and persistence of the Sinite pressure, disregarded as it was by the Khan, while he enjoyed himself with his unworthy favourites. But the extent to which the Sinites were penetrating the country was destined to be brought home to the Mission in more sensational fashion still.

The long caravan had paused in the foothills to remove some of the traces of the hard journey over the passes, and beasts and men were being smartened up as far as the resources at hand would allow. Presently a sensation was caused by the approach from the eastwards of three Tartar soldiers, mounted on rough ponies. The Paharis were anxious to fire on them, but they made signs of peace, and Grandier and the Yuzbashi went out to meet them. Leaving the Pahari officer to hold them in talk, Grandier returned to seek Sir Robert, with sufficiently startling news. A Sinite force was encamped about a mile eastwards, in the lateral valley which formed as it were a natural road for the invasion of Pahar, and

the commandant had sent a message to request the honour of paying his respects to the Elchi Beg. Alam Gul, the Dadkhwah's envoy, hastily summoned, gave it as his opinion that the force was not an army of invasion, but a raiding-party such as constantly harassed the frontier districts nowadays, and that its commandant had been taken by surprise on hearing of the British Mission, and wished to discover the strength of the party.

"This must be the force that came into collision with the Bala troops—been awaiting developments since, I suppose," said Sir Robert. "Well, we'll teach 'em a lesson. Fetch them into the camp, Grandier, and bring me their request in due form. Harmar, if you will mount your sowars as a guard of honour, the sepoy can be cleaning rifles and sharpening bayonets, or anything else that looks warlike and bloodthirsty. The servants can parade everything they possess in the shape of a weapon, and be prepared for having rifles served out to them. The rifles will be in evidence, but they need not be actually served out. Interpreter, ask Alam Gul Beg if there is any village within half an hour of this. Two, are there? Then ask him to send off at once and summon all the male inhabitants with their weapons. There will be no fighting"—as the interpreter, an Argoon, as those of mixed Bala and Pahari blood were called, looked rather blank. "It is merely to produce a moral effect. Doctor, it might possibly conduce to the effect if you got out a few of your instruments."

"For pity's sake, sir," said the Doctor, who was left almost alone at the luncheon-table, "let me have some idea of the plot of the piece, unless it will give things away!"

Sir Robert laughed. "We are merely putting up a big bluff. These Sinites have no business in Pahar. I would get them right out of the valley if I could"—he had the instinctive dislike natural in a man who has lived much among Mohammedans for a race that

worshipped idols and ate pork—"but Alam Gul tells me that a few years ago the Khan acknowledged their right to the eastern end. But they shall go back to that, and we will set up a boundary-post which they will pass at their peril."

The Tartars were duly brought into the camp, and detained under the charge of a guard armed to the teeth while their request was carried to the Elchi. They had the advantage of watching the Tracker infantry at bayonet practice, and of admiring the exquisite edge of the sowars' tulwars. The servants had produced a wonderful collection of weapons, and the Caravanbashi fairly bristled with pistols and daggers. Consequently, when the answer came back that the Elchi Beg could hold no intercourse with the commandant on Pahari territory, but would be happy to receive a visit from him on the border, they were already reduced to a suitable state of meekness. Grandier escorted them to a safe distance from the camp—lest his people's zeal for blood should carry them away, he explained; and indeed, the Pahari troops would have needed no urging to wipe out the hated Sinites—and just as he parted from them, bade them look back. A throng of armed villagers was in the act of trooping in, and another was appearing in the distance. The Tartars could only realise that they were faced by a nation in arms, and with powerful backers.

Half an hour later Sir Robert and his staff mounted and rode along the valley, escorted by the sowars, the Pahari troops and the villagers. Scouts sent on in advance reported that the Sinite camp had been hastily dismantled, and that its occupants were in full march to their own side of the boundary. To spare their feelings, Sir Robert advanced very slowly, and had a tent pitched for him on the Pahari side with considerable ceremony. Here he duly received the visit of the Sinite commandant—an elderly gentleman with a scanty grey beard, who wore a wadded

green satin petticoat and high yellow boots trimmed with fur—and entertained him with tea and polite conversation. It was highly satisfactory to learn that an imperial message unexpectedly received had caused the precipitate withdrawal of the Sinites into their own territory, and the commandant had no objection whatever to assisting to preside at the construction of a cairn marking the exact boundary, and solemnly recognised by both sides as doing so. So amenable was he that he adumbrated a vast plan of fixing the boundary beyond all doubt throughout its length by building a great wall across mountain, valley, and desert, and Sir Robert promised gravely to attend its inauguration.

"Do you believe in that imperial message, sir?" asked Grandier as they rode back, leaving the commandant happy with liberal gifts of crystallised fruit and a case of liqueurs, to console him for his diplomatic defeat.

"Of course not. It was merely a case of 'saving face,' and not very neatly done, either. All the same, I think it's pretty clear that the orders were to disregard any opposition on the Paharis' part, but not to stand up to us. The old fellow was fishing all the time we were talking to find out whether we were going to take over the country, and I could only fence with him, unfortunately."

"I suppose there's no doubt," ventured Grandier, "that the Government will back you up in this that you have done to-day, sir?"

"None whatever, happily. Whether we annex Pahar, or erect it into a 'buffer state' as they call it, the Sinites are to be kept out. If peaceably, so much the better, but kept out, in any case."

"Easier said than done, don't you think, sir?"

"Much. There are no natural frontiers, and it is the easiest thing in the world to cross without knowing it from one country to the other. I shall ask at once for surveyors to delimit the line properly. That is the very first thing to be done."

## 70 England hath Need of Thee

"I could take it in hand, sir, if you wished." Grandier was a little surprised that his chief should seem to ignore the fact.

"My dear fellow, there is work for you in the west, not in the east. What do you think of our communications in this direction—eh? Don't it strike you that the Sinites could cut us off from Bala before we could even start from Khamish to stop them? We must have Brown's route examined and surveyed, so as to give us a second possible line of retreat."

"But the Bala troops would come this way to relieve us, sir, surely? and our own men are at Raiyati."

"Quite so, and they could reopen the passes, no doubt. But come, you have seen what the travelling is like. Do you think it would be a short or easy job to relieve us?"

## CHAPTER VI.

## SOMETHING ROTTEN IN THE STATE.

IF anything had been needed to enhance the prestige of the British Mission, it was supplied by the withdrawal of the Sinites into their own territory. The Paharis were more than ever convinced that Sir Robert had come to perform miracles in the way of bringing back the golden prime of the Great Khan. Hatred of the Sinites was bred in their very bones, deriving its strength not merely from the persistent pin-pricks which had harassed the present weak reign, and the irritating policy of perpetually nibbling off a corner of territory here, and thrusting in a claim of privilege there, but from recollections of the old days when Pahar was an outlying dependency of Sinim. The villagers were full of tales of whole districts devastated for negligence in paying their taxes, and proved that these were not merely legends by exhibiting the heaps of bones that still cumbered the caves whither the victims had been driven, to perish by hunger or cold. Abundant means of annihilating a troublesome population were provided by the foodless mountains and the waterless desert, which also had its tales of horror, and it seemed impossible to doubt that the Sinites had taken full advantage of both.

The distinguishing characteristic of Pahar, as it appeared to the Mission, was sand. The hills were sand, the valleys sand, and when they were left behind,

the general prospect was a sea of sand. The water was full of it, the wind laden with it, and it was perpetually in motion. Alam Gul averred that on still nights he had heard it moving, and it was certain that what was a hillock when you went to bed might be a hollow in the morning. The track was marked by tall poles, like those placed in muddy estuaries to indicate the channels, and in some places only the very top of the pole was visible, while in others almost its whole length swayed uneasily for want of support. It was a country in which defence-work against the sand was as necessary as that against the encroaching sea is in Holland, and the Wise Khan, the present ruler's father, had not forgotten the fact in developing its resources. Besides the stone-built bridges and post-houses which kept his name in remembrance, Alam Gul pointed out proudly the remains of his plantations. Trees had been planted in such a way as to intercept the sand-drift, and irrigated by cunningly contrived canals, interference with which on the part of the people was punishable with death. But in the slackness of the present reign, funds for the upkeep of the canals being wanting, the conservators had supplied the lack of salaries by allowing the precious water—more precious than gold—to be filched away by the husbandmen at a price. The husbandmen, too short-sighted to see that they were cutting their own throats, extended their patches of cultivation under the shelter of the plantations, and rejoiced exceedingly. But deprived of the water which was life to them, the trees withered and died, and such as had not been cut down for firewood were themselves now buried in the sand, which was fast swallowing up the cultivated ground beyond. So ingenious were the people in leading away every drop of water for their own use, that the very rivers themselves were depleted, and most of them made an inglorious end by becoming engulfed in the sand.

The names of the places passed reflected vividly the constant inroads of the two enemies of the country,

the Sinites and the sand. Every village was Yangi Shahr or Yangi Bazar—new town or new market—because the old one, having been reduced by one foe to a heap of ruins, was quickly swallowed up by the other, and every stream was Yangi Su—the new river—because the sand had filled up its old channel, forcing it laboriously to seek itself a fresh one. But the people did not care, so long as they could find water somewhere to irrigate their little fields. They were a cheerful, hardy race, comfortably clad in warm dressing-gowns secured about the waist by broad girdles of embroidered leather, and pudding-basin felt hats with fur round the edge, and they were the very soul of hospitality. The Mission learned to dread the sight of a village, for at each it was necessary to stop and partake of a *dastarkhана* or ceremonial banquet. A tablecloth—whence the name of the entertainment—was spread on the ground, and the meal began with fruit and sweets. Apples and grapes preserved from the previous year, and very unripe apricots, were all the fruit available at present, the hosts lamenting sadly that the visitors should be passing before this year's crop of melons, nectarines and peaches was ready, but the Mission took the deprivation rather thankfully than otherwise. The dessert was followed by mutton pies, and these by various sweet dishes. Then came the chief feature of the repast, an elaborate *pilau* compounded of innumerable ingredients, most of them highly indigestible, and the meal ended with soup. Happily Alam Gul and the Yuzbashi were included in the invitation, for they were always prepared to do justice to the delicacies set before them, and thus the Europeans survived without outraging the feelings of their hosts, though yearning dyspeptically for a table of their own and plain roast or boiled.

As they approached the capital, the state of the country improved. It was evidently a case of "out of sight, out of mind," with the poorer districts near the frontier, for here the excellent system of canals



was kept in passable repair, and in consequence the frequent tracts of desert became fewer and fewer, until the district round Khamish was like one garden. The scene was curiously English, with farmhouses embosomed in trees, fields of springing corn and green meadows divided by stone walls and five-barred gates, while there were pens made of hurdles into which to drive the sheep at night. Here in this lower region summer had already come, and the trees were laden with fruit as yet unripe, while the inhabitants had exchanged their winter garb for high embroidered caps, long white nightgowns, and wrinkled topboots, men and women alike. The country was so populous that there was even a release from the *dastarkhana*, since no embassy could possibly have disposed of all the meals that would have been necessary, but the people on the road ceased their work, or dismounted from their horses, and stood on one side, with their arms respectfully folded, to wish the Elch *Salaam aleikûm*.

"All very nice and friendly," grumbled Sir Robert to his nephew, in a moment of expansiveness, "but there's no fight in these fellows round here. They have been spoilt by prosperity and two generations of peace. Compare them with the people nearer the hills. No weapons, you see—only a knife in the girdle. They have not been trained to fight, and don't expect it. Now I see why the Sinites have been able to press 'em so hard."

"But it's an awfully nice sort of country," said Arthur, looking about him.

"Delightful place. Suit your aunt to a T, if we could find a way of getting her over the mountains. If it depended on bringing her the way we came, she would have to stay on one side of the passes and I on the other till I am recalled. But I have great hopes of Brown's route, though I am rather surprised we have seen nothing of him and his caravan yet."

Khamish was not an imposing-looking place as they approached it. The dryness of the climate allowed the use of unburnt brick, which gave walls, houses, and

public buildings alike a dusty and tumble-down appearance. Moreover, the city stood on the level, and the buildings were low, so that it could hardly be seen among the surrounding trees, for there were gardens and orchards on every side. To the younger men of the party the place looked prosperous and busy enough, as the people poured forth from their houses to welcome the Elchi Beg. Exaggerated reports of the encounter with the Sinites on the border had reached Khamish, and it was confidently believed that an army of a hundred thousand men had fled in confusion at the mere word of the Envoy, and that their leader had been brought before him and obliged to prostrate himself at his feet. The shouts of *Salaam aleikûm* were deafening, men broke through the guards and tried to touch Sir Robert's clothes or horse, women held up their children on high to see him as they invoked blessings on his head, and those who could only join in the demonstration from the roofs flung down flowers and greenery until the street was strewn with them. But Sir Robert, scanning place and people with the eye of an administrator, saw the decay into which the walls and gates had been allowed to fall, and noted that nearly all the population seemed to be afflicted with diseases that were a sure sign of bad water.

Through tortuous streets, some of them roofed over with awnings as a protection from the sun, the long procession wound until it reached the quarters prepared for the Mission, which were those occupied in previous summers by the British representative from Bala. The first sight of them was not inspiring, for all that could be seen from the street was a high mud wall, pierced only with a low-browed gateway like the entrance to a cave, which gave access, so far as could be seen, merely to a very dark passage.

"I say, what a beastly place!" said Arthur.

"It's worse than that," said Harmar, by whom he was riding, in a quick sharp whisper. "There's something wrong about it."

"Well, you are a cheerful idiot!" said Arthur. "Got 'em again, I suppose?" for Harmar, whose eyes had an uncomfortable look of "seeing things," was infallibly doomed to be set down by his comrades as a sufferer from delirium tremens. His men, of course, regarded him with something approaching veneration for the very same reason.

"I have had the same feeling on coming to a house where a murder had been committed," said Harmar, in the same breathless voice. "Perhaps something of that sort has happened here."

"A whole cemetery full, I daresay," responded Arthur carelessly. "Everybody knows the great Khan wasn't particular about bloodshed when he turned the Sinites out of Khamish. Now off you go."

The elaborate interchange of compliments between Sir Robert and Alam Gul, and also with another representative of the Dadkhwah who was waiting in the doorway, was over, and the escort had to form up so that the Envoy could ride in between them, rather to the danger of his cocked hat, for the arch was not constructed to admit of the passage of plumes. But once inside the passage, he found that it grew wider and lighter. On either side was a doorway leading to a courtyard, that on the right hand fitted up for the escort, that on the left as stables and servants' quarters. The end of the passage opened into a garden, in which were various pavilions and a large house for the members of the Mission, with a paved courtyard of its own, on which the principal rooms opened. The public reception-room was furnished with chairs and tables of native manufacture, of which the gorgeous coverings had to atone for the clumsiness of the workmanship, and which were arranged as if in an upholsterer's shop, all as close together as possible. Bright-coloured rugs formed the furniture of the bedrooms and sitting-rooms, and the latter had also cushioned benches round the walls. The windows had paper instead of glass, and the lower part of the walls was covered with cotton velvet, above which

were recesses for shelves, contrived in the thickness of the wall. Sir Robert expressed his admiration of everything, and his gratitude for the completeness of the preparations made, and the Dadkhwah's ambassador retired, with the regulation entreaty that the Elchi Beg would report his diligence to his Highness the Khan when he saw him. The rooms on one side of the courtyard were allotted to Arthur and Grandier, and on the other to Harmar and the Doctor, and after exploring them, all returned to Sir Robert's reception-room for the dinner which had been sent in for them, and which followed only too faithfully the lines of the *dastarkhana*. Grandier broached the enquiry whether it would be regarded as subversive of all Pahari morality if the Mission humbly requested that in future its meals might begin with soup and end with dessert, instead of reversing the process, and a brisk discussion was going on, when Arthur noticed that Harmar was silent.

"It is here, in this house—the shadow," he explained unwillingly, bringing his eyes back from the recesses of the walls when he found Arthur looking at him.

"Of course there's a shadow in all the rooms, with this stuff in the windows," protested Arthur.

"It's not that kind of shadow. You don't see it; you feel it. I didn't feel it in any other place we have stayed in."

"Well, for goodness' sake, leave off feeling it, can't you? If the place is haunted, Sir Robert is about as tough a subject for a ghost to tackle as I know of. You take my advice and turn teetotaler!"

But even this ribaldry could not make Harmar smile, though he said no more about the feeling that oppressed him. The rest of the day was passed in unpacking and stowing away the possessions of the party, for the Dadkhwah had sent a message that as the Elchi Beg must be fatigued by his journey, the Khan would not receive him immediately. The Dadkhwah himself visited Sir Robert the next day, and repeated his master's message, rather to the Envoy's annoyance.

But when a week passed, and the Khan's excessive consideration continued, annoyance began to deepen into indignation. The time was not precisely wasted, for the members of the Mission were able to go about the city unofficially and note the state of affairs, but in view of the comparatively short time that the passes remained open, it was all-important for Sir Robert to know whether the Khan wished him to remain in Pahar over the winter, or to leave before autumn came on. If the assurances of Colonel Brown, in his "Desdichado" letters—that the establishment of a British protectorate was the dearest wish of the Khan's heart—were founded upon a misapprehension, this would weaken the whole case for intervention, if not in Sir Robert's opinion, at least in that of the Government he represented, which had no particular interest in merely safeguarding the British frontier. Moreover, rumours filtered in, through the servants and the interpreter, that the real cause of the delay was that the Khan was enjoying a summer holiday, so to speak, in one of his gardens outside the city, and that the Dadkhwah could not induce him to break into it even for a day by coming back to the palace and receiving the Mission. Sir Robert was always a man of action, and when Niaz Beg paid his next visit, he found the Elchi Khana in a state of wild confusion. The *yakdans*, or pony trunks, were being got out, provisions were being bought in large quantities from traders who had been bribed to bring their wares to the house instead of taking them to the Bazar, and Grandier, Harmar, and the Caravanbashi were passing the ponies in review and talking, with every appearance of earnest absorption, to a Khamish horse-dealer who had been summoned to attend. The preparations the Dadkhwah beheld could have but one meaning, and the old man was ushered into Sir Robert's presence with the tears streaming down his face. How had he failed in his duty towards his master's guests, he asked piteously? Were their quarters not to their taste, was their food not sufficient? If there was anything lacking that all

Asia could provide, let them name it, and not bring eternal disgrace upon him by the conviction that his remissness had driven them to depart. When his lamentations ceased, Sir Robert spoke.

"Let your Excellency tell me what use it is to remain here, if I am not allowed to see his Highness's face?"

"*Hasrat*<sup>1</sup> is thoughtful for the comfort of his guests after their long journey——" the well-worn excuse came glibly to the Dadkhwah's lips, but this time he met a look from Sir Robert which told him its work was done. "*Hasrat* is himself indisposed," he substituted eagerly. "It is not our custom to publish abroad the maladies of the great, but to your Excellency I can speak without fear, knowing that no advantage will be taken."

"May Heaven grant his Highness a speedy recovery!" said Sir Robert politely. "Is the illness serious?"

"Nay," said the Dadkhwah hastily, showing his relief too soon. "By the end of this week, or at least the beginning of next, he will stand upon his feet."

"Next week?" Sir Robert was meditating aloud. "We shall have almost reached the pass by then."

"Sahib," said Niaz Beg humbly, "it is vain to try and deceive one of your Excellency's penetration. If you will honour me by opening your mind to me, upon me be the blame if satisfaction be not obtained."

"If I am to stay longer in Pahar," said Sir Robert, speaking slowly and distinctly, "I must see his Highness at once. I must know what was in his mind when he sent to India the messages imploring aid from the Sarkar—what exactly he desires, and how he proposes to co-operate. If he is too ill to see me, I must see his son, or both of them, and they must speak in his name."

The Dadkhwah looked round apprehensively. "*Hasrat*'s sons are possessed of no such power," he said almost in a whisper. "The one is forbidden to

<sup>1</sup> His Highness.

see his father's face, and the other takes no interest in public affairs."

"Still I must see them if I cannot see their father," said Sir Robert steadily. "Her Majesty's Government have every desire to strengthen the hands of his Highness against Sinim, but they must be assured that he will do his part."

Niaz Beg made the familiar gesture of throwing dust upon his head. "Truly the anger of Heaven must be hot against this land!" he said despairingly. "The spirit of the great departed—upon whom be peace!—has not descended upon their seed—unless that luckless one, Ismail Beg, have inherited some portion. With the enemy pressing on us all along the border, we have no one to make head against them. I had hoped"—he became suddenly confidential—"that your honour might deign to confer altogether with me, so that I might obtain authority to take the necessary measures, and Hasrat need not be disturbed."

But Sir Robert knew too well the danger of acting without a definite understanding with the Khan, though he was sorry for the old man in his hopeless struggle against the dead weight of his master's inertia, and he shook his head. "My instructions are clear," he said, "and to-morrow I must either be received by his Highness or take my departure."

The Dadkhwah left the house with gestures of despair, but either he must have been more successful as a pleader than he had feared, or the Khan must have been more open to reason, for that evening a message was received from him that in spite of his indisposition, his Highness would receive the Mission on the morrow at the garden where he was staying for the present. Full-dress uniforms were unpacked and accoutrements burnished once more, and a gallant company rode out to the garden amid the acclamations of the populace. At this time of year, all the well-to-do people in Khamish forsook the city for the garden pavilions, and there was not a wall without its eager gazers, mostly women, who made a great parade of

veiling themselves as the procession approached, but would have been deeply disappointed if their ruddy cheeks and black eyebrows—the tints of both enhanced by art—had escaped the compliment of an admiring glance. At the Khan's garden the very shadows seemed alive with white-robed forms, and in a meadow sloping towards the river a number of more strenuous damsels were holding pony-races among themselves. Their Tartar blood showed itself in the skill and daring with which they rode, and their activity was something almost monstrous to eyes accustomed to Indian languor. They did not at all mind being watched—it seemed to be sufficient if they had a veil somewhere about, flying from their high caps and not necessarily over the face at all—and the younger members of the Mission congregated at a point of vantage and displayed a lively interest, while Sir Robert was conducted to the pavilion where the ruler awaited him.

One glance at the seated figure which greeted him with a bland stare was enough to assure the Envoy that the rumours which had reached him through Colonel Brown were true—the Khan was addicted to drugs. This it was that accounted for the supineness with which he had met—and contributed to—the misfortunes of his realm, and this also that gave him an almost superhuman cunning in devising means by which his tranquillity might remain undisturbed though everything crashed in ruins around him. The Khan excused himself politely from leaving his cushions on account of his illness, enquired after the health of Queen Victoria and the Viceroy, and expressed the languid hope that the Elchi Beg had not found the journey to Pahar very disagreeable. It was contrary to etiquette to force on a business discussion without invitation at this first meeting, but Sir Robert saw that it was now or never. The Khan's physicians had clearly employed strong remedies to make him fit for the interview, and there was no knowing when he might next be able to transact business, wherefore



Sir Robert enquired in so many words what were his Highness's precise wishes as to help from England. The answer was comprehensive, if not explicit.

"Pahar is yours," said the Khan liberally. "The army is yours, the treasury is at your disposal. Here is my signet"—he took it off and handed it to Sir Robert,—“now all men will obey you as the king. I am the Empress's suppliant, I ask only to cling to her skirts.”

"May I not know something of your Highness's views on these great matters?" asked the ambassador, rather embarrassed by the plenary powers conferred upon him.

"What can I say?" The Khan's eyes were growing not exactly sleepy, but distant. "Rule Pahar, keep out the Sinites, leave me and my people in peace."

"May I have the honour of waiting upon your Highness's heir? Through him I might ascertain your wishes."

"Ah, but who is he?" The Khan smiled shrewdly.

"Surely that is for your Highness to say?"

"Nay, verily." The smile became fatuous. "Were I to presume to decide where Heaven has made decision impossible, would not my repose be for ever broken by the fear that I had perpetrated an injustice? That risk I will never run."

"Yet the decision must be made some day," ventured Sir Robert.

"But it will not be mine. I shall have peace while I live," was the placid answer.

"Will your Highness permit me to converse with the two Begs, and give you my humble opinion as to which is the better fitted to succeed to the throne?" Sir Robert was growing desperate.

"Your Excellency may indeed make the choice, if your conscience will permit it, but you must not tell me, nor the youth himself, nor any other—save perhaps my servant Niaz in secret. Why should I be deafened day and night by the complaints of the loser and his mother?"

"I entreat your Highness to permit——"

"Enough, pray!" said the Khan irritably. "Of what use is it to be a king, if one cannot ensure peaceful days? And now let your Excellency call in your servants, for I feel my sickness coming upon me, and I desire to show them my favour while I can."

The other members of the Mission were summoned and presented, and all, including Sir Robert, invested with dresses of honour. These comprised in each case a complete Pahari costume, but happily, all that it was necessary to do at the moment was to have the gold-embroidered robe thrown on over English clothes, and the party rode back to the Elchi Khana in great splendour, keen-eyed watchers among the asters and balsams growing on the roofs murmuring with awe to one another when they saw Sir Robert, "He bears the king's signet!"

## CHAPTER VII.

## THE RIVAL HEIRS.

THE supreme powers with which Sir Robert had been invested turned out to be a good deal less comprehensive than the Khan's words might seem to have implied. The treasury was empty, and not only empty, but subject to continual demands for money on behalf of the ruler. The army was unpaid and ill equipped, and naturally small in numbers. The light cavalry, to which the genius of the people and the nature of their country pointed as the special arm of Pahar, was almost non-existent, the hardy horsemen of the frontiers finding it, no doubt, more profitable to raid their neighbours than to render gratuitous service to the state. The one force—with the exception of the Khan's mounted guard, part of which had been sent to meet the Mission—which had been kept up to full strength was that composed of *taifurchis*. These were armed with prehistoric matchlocks called *taifurs*, each of which required the services of five men, two to support the weapon and three to load and fire it. The Dadkhwah had a pathetic faith in the *taifur*, and it was owing to his efforts that it had survived the general wreck. There was an arms factory in the capital, which had been liberally subsidised and carefully looked after by the two previous Khans, but was now almost dead of inanition. Want of modern machinery would in any case have prevented it from turning out rifles, but it might have

gone on manufacturing matchlocks and repairing the cast-off European muskets of which there were a good many in the country, had it received any encouragement. The character of the civil officials might be gathered from the state into which the all-important works for irrigation and defence against the sand had been allowed to fall, and no one seemed to think the worse of them for it. Yet the people, like their ruler, appeared genuinely anxious to have their country saved for them, though it was clear to the outsider that if this was to be done the bankrupt treasury must first be filled, an army raised and armed, and a civil service with some pretensions to probity enlisted.

What puzzled everybody was why Sir Robert, having been invested by the Khan with the necessary authority, did not at once proclaim the annexation of the country. Whenever he went out he was followed by an eager crowd, expectant of the ceremony, and when he was indoors the people hung about outside waiting for him. It was the Dadkhwah who put the general feeling into words, when the Envoy, having completed his examination of the resources of the state, was discussing with him its unsatisfactory result.

"All the words of your Excellency are true," he said. "But I could have told you these things the day you arrived. Why waste time looking at them? If Pahar were once made part of the Empress's dominions, you could set them right immediately."

"But I have no power to take over the country," objected Sir Robert, and was astonished to see how the old man's face fell. "My instructions are merely to report on the state of affairs here to those who sent me."

"But Istākis Beg said——" cried the Dadkhwah indignantly, and stopped. Sir Robert pounced on the admission.

"Then Colonel Brown is here—in the city? and both he and you have concealed his presence from me?"

"Nay, sahib; but before you arrived he passed

through with his household, journeying to his own dwelling at Khush Urda, twenty miles to the eastward."

"How long ago was this?" demanded Sir Robert, though mentally calculating that it must have been quite possible for Colonel Brown, travelling—as he alleged—by an easier route, and certainly with a smaller caravan and therefore without the delay necessary for collecting baggage-animals, to arrive at Khamish before the Mission. "And why have you said nothing to me till now?"

"It was two days before the light of your honour's countenance irradiated the city. And Istākis Beg himself bade me say nothing of his presence. 'For,' said he, 'the Elchi Beg will seek in vain to behold Hasrat's face, and his thoughts will fly to me, knowing that my power here is as great as it is in his own land. When, therefore, he cries out to know where I am, send me word, and I will come to his help.'"

"And why did you not send for him?" asked Sir Robert, with mingled irritation and amusement.

"I wished to see whether that which he said was true," replied the Dadkhwah simply. "And behold, it was not, for your Excellency has seen Hasrat's face, and without any help from Istākis Beg."

"But if it had been true, you might have ruined your country by not calling him in."

"I thought it was not true, sahib. 'Lo!' said the reed that grew at the point of the sandspit, 'I have divided the river in twain.' But a child plucked the reed for a plaything, and the river still flowed in the double channel. So is it with Istākis Beg. And when he said that by his writings to the Empress's Amban (Viceroy) in Hindustan and to her Dadkhwah in Frangistan he had brought it about that Pahar should be added to her dominions—that also was not true?" added the old man suddenly.

"I have no doubt that he believed it was, because he hoped it. But the truth at present is as I have

told you—the matter does not lie with me. And before I send home my report I must wait upon the Khan's sons, if it is in any way possible. Aga Mohammed Beg will receive me this afternoon. Is there any way of obtaining speech with Ismail Beg?"

"That I think your Excellency may safely leave to the Beg himself, when he learns that you have seen his brother," replied the Dadkhwah, with something like a twinkle in his eye. "And of that I am glad, for I believe you will find more satisfaction in him than in Aga Mohammed Beg."

It would certainly be impossible to find less, thought Sir Robert ruefully when he had had his interview. Aga Mohammed's cue was evidently to make his visitor do all the talking, and say nothing himself. But since Sir Robert was not precisely a child in these matters, it resulted that neither side said anything, beyond mere formulas of compliment, and tentative remarks which were in the nature of sparring for position, and led no further. Unfortunately the Envoy felt certain that had he been empowered to announce the impending proclamation of a British protectorate the Beg would have come to heel at once, but since the future was in suspense he exercised his undoubted right of suspending judgment also.

Sir Robert could never quite make up his mind whether it was by coincidence or not that Colonel Brown appeared at the gate of the Elchi Khana two days later. He created a vast disturbance by trying to swagger in without regard to the protests of the sentry, who insisted on summoning a comrade and passing him on in due form. The lively and abusive conversation which ensued brought out Harmar, who was inspecting his men in their courtyard, and he ushered the visitor into Sir Robert's presence. It was impossible not to feel that Colonel Brown was distinctly disappointed that his help had not proved necessary in securing an interview with the Khan, but he carried it off with much secrecy and importance.

"Couldn't look you up before, Sir Robert," he said

## 88. England hath Need of Thee

bluffly. "Most responsible business on hand—your whole affair knocked on the head if I hadn't seen to it. Want you all to come out to my little place at Khush Urda from Saturday to Monday—combine business with pleasure—hey?"

"Afraid it's quite impossible for me to leave Khamish," Sir Robert assured him. "Important despatches might arrive at any time. But I'm sure the young fellows will jump at the chance. You haven't met Harmar and the Doctor yet, of course."

"If Harmar's the young chap who looks at you as if there was something wrong about you, I don't want to meet him," was the explosive reply. "But as for not leaving Khamish—nonsense, my dear sir! you must leave it. At the peril of his life and mine"—with intense solemnity—"I have arranged that Ismail Beg shall meet you at Khush Urda"—this in a thrilling whisper.

"Ismail Beg? But I thought he was in honourable exile at Aksang, three hundred miles away!"

"He was," said Colonel Brown darkly. "But don't be afraid. I will produce him at the proper moment. I am his father and his mother, and he knows it—and is grateful too, I believe, which is more than some people are." Sir Robert remained unmoved by the insinuation, and Colonel Brown gathered up his topi and whip, and resumed with great heartiness, "All right, then; see you all on Saturday. Delightful journey—most pleasing country—ladies dying to welcome you."

"One moment, please. We can't all come. Two must stay here, and I think——"

"No, no!" ferociously. "Pray allow me, Sir Robert, to invite who I please to my house. Captain Grandier and your nephew—no one else. Your own good heart"—he dropped quite unexpectedly into the style of an old-fashioned novel—"will reveal the reason to you without my betraying the little secrets of youth and innocence."

"But it could only be on condition——" began Sir Robert.

"I don't care what the condition is. I'll let you into a secret—and your own experience as a married man will tell you I'm right. Here's Miss Travis—excellent person, but like all women, disposed to meddle with what don't concern her—begging me not to invite Grandier out—says it's hard upon Noel. Fact is, sir, the good lady's jealous—all women of that age are,—can't bear to see a girl happy with her lover. Says your nephew would be safer—so he would, indeed, safe as a post! Well, I'm taking her advice, and inviting him, but I'll have Grandier as well, if I have anybody. That's the way to manage women, Sir Robert; give with one hand and take away with the other. Then you get 'em into a proper state of dependence upon you—hey?"

"I really can't say, not having tried. My experience don't accord with yours, you see. The voting is two to one, is it?—your niece and you against Miss Travis? I don't agree with your opinion of her either, by the way."

"Of course Noel wants him to come. Why else should I want him, pray? If a man ain't to be master in his own house, where is he to be master, I should like to know?" with a sublime disregard of any possible accusation of inconsistency; and Colonel Brown stalked out, repeating as he went that Grandier and Arthur were to be his guests on this occasion. The other two he would invite later.

"I suppose Grandier will wish to go?" said Sir Robert afterwards to his nephew. "He may think it's not good enough, though I don't mind an interview or two, but there must be no open flirtation. I understand you are invited purely to act as a blind. Old Brown was good enough to say he regarded you as safe."

"Safe? I should think so! Who would look at



me when Grandier was within a mile?" said Arthur, in perfect seriousness. "Oh, he'll go, sir—of course he will. How could he stay away, when she's as good as sent to say she wants him to come?"

It might, or it might not, have been another coincidence, that on the day which intervened between Colonel Brown's visit and the journey to Khush Urda, an Argoon—these people are the natural agents and intermediaries throughout Central Asia—came to the Elchi Khana to see Sir Robert on behalf of Aga Mohammed Beg. His ostensible errand was to apologize on the Beg's account for not returning the Envoy's visit owing to illness, but the real reason was to let Sir Robert know that his support was in the market. On certain conditions—one of which was naturally his recognition as heir-apparent—Aga Mohammed Beg was willing to withdraw his valuable aid from the pro-Sinite party in Pahar, and throw it on the English side. Sir Robert promised to take note of the offer, and dismissed the ambassador, adding immensely to his reputation in court circles by his unmoved demeanour and failure to jump at the chance.

The journey to Khush Urda was begun in the early morning, for the heat was now intense. The snow-fed floods of the early summer were diminishing, and with them the greenness of the landscape. Except along the actual course of the rivers the fields were beginning to look brown and bare. The harvest seemed to ripen astonishingly early, and the ripe fruit in the orchards looked unseasonable, but in this climate of extremes the year's early freshness was quickly exchanged for dry heat. But Khush Urda was still a spot of emerald in the encircling brown, and bore out the promise of its name—pleasant resting-place. It stood sufficiently near the hills for Colonel Brown to have taken advantage of a narrow valley to construct a dam, and the water from this reservoir made an oasis of his estate when all the rest of Pahar was dried up. The Colonel was naturally proud of the result of his

labours, and the whole of the afternoon, which was spent in riding over the place, was too little to allow him to give Sir Robert a full outline of his schemes for extending the benefits of his system of irrigation to the whole country. Tanks and reservoirs seemed foreign to the genius of the Paharis, clever as they were in the infinite subdivision of the water of their rivers by means of canals, but Colonel Brown was convinced that the adoption of a proper storage system would make the literal desert blossom, and even restore to their ancient courses and outfalls the streams which now lost themselves ingloriously in the sand. Sir Robert was a little tired of the subject of irrigation when they reached the spot where the ladies were to meet them with tea—a grassy sward, delightful beyond expression to Indian eyes, backed by thickets of yellow roses. Grandier and Arthur, bored beyond words by the afternoon's peregrinations, cheered up at the welcome sight, and did full justice to the meal, eating peaches and apricots by the basketful, as Sir Robert observed with some alarm. But Miss Travis assured him that everybody in Pahar ate fruit all day long in the summer—and wasn't it a pity it could not be sent to India, where it would be so valuable? But, perhaps—answering her own question—it might not arrive in good condition, and would only cause illness, so all was for the best. She talked on a little at random, nervously anxious to prevent Colonel Brown from drawing attention, by words or looks, to the fact that Grandier had suggested to Noel that they should take a stroll after tea. To the surprise of the elders as much as his own, she immediately invited Arthur to come too, and he was too much taken aback to think of an excuse for refusing. It was quite clear, as the three wandered away among the rose-bushes, that the girl was dividing her conversation equally between the two young men, and Sir Robert felt contrite. Miss Noel must be taking his prohibition a good deal more literally than he had meant her to do.

Grandier was of much the same opinion, and expressed it plainly to Arthur later on.

"Look here," he said. "I don't know what you think of yourself, but I call it an awfully shabby trick to stick to me like Mary's little lamb in the way you do."

"I couldn't help it," pleaded Arthur. "I'm really awfully sorry, but when she kept talking to me——"

"It was nothing but shyness, you must see that. To-morrow you have just got to play up to her, and then make yourself scarce when I tip you the wink."

"But I say, I promised Miss Travis to look over all the odd bits of wood and stuff she has got together, and see whether it would be possible to knock up a chicken-house out of 'em."

"Well, you can do it after you've done what I tell you. You simply lay yourself out to be made use of—hanging about and wagging your tail like a dog that wants a stick thrown for him. No woman could resist finding jobs for you."

"All right. I'll do your job first," said Arthur good-humouredly, but this was not so easy as it seemed. The day being Sunday, Colonel Brown conducted a service for his household, and read a sermon of his own composition. He had first asked Sir Robert if he would like to preach—a generous offer which was hastily declined. Two hours in the middle of the day must be devoted to rest—at least, Miss Travis said so, and swept Noel away with her—and it was not till after tea that the opportunity came. Colonel Brown was an authority on Prophecy, and so was Miss Travis, and they always argued their respective views on Sunday evenings. But Colonel Brown was a most unsatisfactory antagonist, for whereas poor Miss Travis studied during the week the points raised, and produced convincing proofs that he was in the wrong, he always disconcerted her by airily abandoning his last positions, and going off on a new tack altogether. Reproached for this inconsistency, he was wont to reply that women could not

argue, and it was no use expecting them to do it—which exasperated Miss Travis almost to frenzy. This afternoon, resolved to pin him down to something, she had brought paper and pencil, supporting them precariously on the substantial back of Bumpus, who was asleep on her lap, and with whose black hairs, for he was shedding his coat, all her white gowns were plentifully besprinkled. She wore white under protest, as unsuited to her age and position, but unavoidable in a Pahar summer, and comforted herself with the reflection—uttered by Browning before her, had she only known it—that these little worries were sent us for our good.

The rest of the party melted away as soon as the argument was in full swing, Noel and the two young men strolling off as they had done the day before, while Sir Robert brought out a long letter from his wife, which had arrived with other correspondence just as he started from the Elchi Khana, and wandered off alone to read it over again. Anxious lines showed themselves in his forehead as he read. Marian was not being properly careful of herself. She wrote cheerfully, but he could detect the effort underlying the cheerfulness. She needed him to look after her; she was feeling lost without him. For one wild moment he thought of suggesting that she should come out at once, and cross the passes—which were much less dangerous at this season than in the spring—with the survey party for which he had asked, but he pulled himself up sternly. Nothing would induce him to let her make such a journey without him to take care of her—and besides, the survey party was probably already on its way. It seemed strange that he had not yet received any answer to his application, which was to be telegraphed on from Sheonath, but perhaps the Government of India, realising the importance of haste, were sending the men on at once. He unfolded the letter again to see exactly what his wife said about her health. Ah, here was the place:—  
.. “You ought to be very pleased with me, for

I have just sent for the doctor of my own accord, because I am feeling the heat a good deal. He tells me to rest as much as possible, and to keep cheerful. That is easy enough to-day, when your dear letter has just arrived, and it will keep me cheerful until I begin to watch and hunger for the next. Dear Robert, it is so good of you to write such long letters, but you know as well as I do that I live upon them——”

The drumming of horse-hoofs close at hand made him raise his head. He had wandered out on what Colonel Brown called his Maidan—a wide space in front of the house sloping gently to the river, green with clover in the spring, but now bare after the cutting of the second crop. From the east there came thundering a man on a great black horse, brandishing about his head a gleaming sword. For the next few moments Sir Robert found himself, quite involuntarily, the central figure in an extremely interesting exhibition. The black horse seemed to be on all sides of him at once, the air to be full of whirling and descending curved blades. As he stood grimly still, one stroke just shaved his ear, the next shored a button from his coat. The letter was swept from his hand, and cut through and through while in the air, yet he himself was not even scratched. It was impossible to move his head, but he had a vague vision of Arthur dashing out of the trees on the left of the house and rushing towards them with a stick of some sort in his hand. The descending sword cut through the stick within an inch of the handle as he came, the black horse swept on without a pause, and thundered away eastwards, and Sir Robert and his nephew were left staring helplessly at one another.

“Are you hurt, sir?” gasped Arthur, very white. “I thought the fellow had killed you.”

“Not touched. It was not intended. Pretty bad moment, though.”

“A Ghazi, I suppose.” Arthur was too much disturbed to take in what was said. “Do get back



‘Brandishing about his head a gleaming sword.’



to the house, uncle. He may be here again in a minute."

"Oh no, he won't. Pick up the pieces of your aunt's letter for me, will you? That ill-mannered *badmash* has slashed it to bits."

"But who was the chap? Do you know him?"

"By what I have heard of the young gentleman already, I can make a very fair guess," said Sir Robert, putting together the fragments of the letter as Arthur handed them to him. "Perhaps Miss Travis can provide me with some gum and a sheet of paper?"

They were all arriving, panting and horrified, Colonel Brown and Miss Travis from the verandah, Grandier and Noel from the garden; the servants also appearing from the back regions, drawn by Arthur's shouts as he ran. Miss Travis burst into unabashed tears.

"I thought you were killed, Sir Robert!" she sobbed. "And I should have had to write and break it to poor dear Lady Charteris. But if it makes you more careful another time——" She stopped, non-plussed, for not even her practised mind could find an appropriate moral on this occasion.

"Are your friend's practical jokes always of such a very crude order, Brown?" asked Sir Robert of his host, whose utterances had been unintelligible owing to fury.

"The young Shaitan!" burst from Colonel Brown. "Who could have dreamt——? He was testing you, Sir Robert."

"So I inferred. Was the idea of a test yours?"

"Sir," said Colonel Brown, with dignity, "the insult affects me as much as yourself. I must have described you to Ismail Beg in too glowing terms—it is a fault to which I am liable in speaking of my friends. He is seized with the notion of trying your courage and coolness for himself. But no harm is done, I trust? At any rate, he did not knock your hat off."



## 96      England hath Need of Thee

"Happily not. If he had, you know as well as I do that bloodshed would not have washed it out. Your friends will wish you hadn't such a high opinion of them, Brown, if it leads to tests of this kind."

"The fellow must have been mad!" lamented Colonel Brown bitterly. "I suppose he has ruined his chances with you?"

"What do you think yourself? Put it to him, as you seem to be on close terms with him, and see what he thinks. I leave it with the two of you."

## CHAPTER VIII.

ISMAIL BEG.

"WELL, did you get on all right to-day?" enquired Arthur of Grandier at the close of that Sunday evening, which had been largely spent by Miss Travis in apologizing to and consoling the injured Bumpus, whom she had flung to the winds on beholding Sir Robert's predicament.

"No, as badly as possible. Why on earth didn't you slip away without saying anything, instead of announcing exactly what you were going to do? It was simply inviting her to say that we would come too."

"It seemed so rude. And you didn't come, anyhow."

"No, because I put my foot down. And much good it was! I ask you, what are you to do with a girl who tells you in so many words that she prefers you to keep your distance?"

"Haven't an idea. What *do* you do?" asked Arthur, with the simple faith of the novice in the expert.

"Why, with any other girl you'd know it was just a bid to lead you on, but I really believe—extraordinary as it seems—that she means it. When I asked her what she thought being engaged meant, she had the cheek to tell me we were not engaged. Sir Robert said so."

"I say, that was a bit of a facer!"

"Pretty thick, wasn't it? Well, I'm not ashamed

to say I lost my temper then, and let her have it. I laid it on, you know—put it to her that after all the time I had been gone on her, and following her into the wilds, and only wanting a kind word or two and ordinarily decent treatment—well, it wasn't treating a fellow fairly—was it now, really? I think I did make her a little ashamed of herself, but do you think she would behave like an ordinary human being even then? Not a bit of it!"

"I never heard anything like it!" said Grandier's faithful henchman. "I say, do tell me—if you don't mind, that is——"

"May as well talk about it to some one, as the proper person is no good," replied the disconsolate lover. "She did really seem to be sorry when I put it to her, but she looked at me as if I was a new kind of specimen that she didn't quite like, and said what a dreadful pity it was that real people were so fearfully unlike people in books. I said, 'Hang books! why aren't people in books more like real people?' and she got most frightfully waxy, and said she liked the people in books much the best. Well, there you are, you know! and she went on to say that she would try to be more what I wanted her to be if I would try to be more like what she wanted me to be. D'you ever hear such cool cheek? Just to see how far she would go, I asked her very politely what she wanted me to be like, and she brought out one of those idiotic confession books, which darling Travy got her for a surprise on her birthday, and showed me her page—really with a little feeling and confusion, almost like an ordinary girl. But what do you think she had put down as her favourite quality in man? I'll give you a dozen guesses. 'Self-control,' I tell you—self-control! And when I yelled, she quoted poetry at me—Tennyson, if you please! Self-control, indeed!" the word evidently rankled.

"And what was her favourite quality in woman?" enquired Arthur, with the kindly intention of lightening the gloom. The effort met with some success.

“‘Tranquillity without cheerfulness.’ Nasty one for poor old Travy—eh? Well, I got back on her when I took out my pencil and wrote a page for myself. I told her my favourite quality in man was ‘determination,’ and in woman ‘responsiveness’—what d’ye think of that? And I told her it was all rot talking of altering ourselves to suit one another. I didn’t want her any different—if she would only show a grain of sense, I might have said, but I didn’t—and she had jolly well got to take me as I am——”

“And be thankful,” put in Arthur.

“I didn’t say that, of course, but I can tell you I thought it. Did anybody ever hear of such a fuss about nothing? I told her she hadn’t the remotest glimmering of an idea what love meant, and she said—No, I won’t tell you what she said, because it was only done to tease, of course, and I shouldn’t like to give her away. But it made me pretty sick, and I was as near as possible to breaking the whole thing off. It’s the insufferable way she says the things, as if she meant them—too much for any man to stand. Then we heard you yelling like fury, and we rushed, of course, and that’s how the thing stands. But I’m about fed up with her——”

“Oh no!” said Arthur earnestly, in absolute good faith; “think how she would feel afterwards when she realised what she had done!”

“If it brought her to her senses, I shouldn’t mind.” Grandier was still implacable. “I wouldn’t be hard upon her, of course, when she wanted to make up, but a little obstinate piece of ice like that is enough to cool any man off.”

“My uncle says she’s too young to realise things—ought to be still in the nursery.”

“Well, there’s something in that. But when she does realise things—my word! she’ll have to make all the running for herself, for I shan’t help her.”

“Nonsense! you know very well you’ll meet her more than half-way, and be glad to. I hate to hear you talk like that,” protested Arthur. “After all, it’s

jolly good for you. The women have always spoilt you, and you know it. Perhaps she knows it too, and she's just taking it out of you."

"If I thought that——!" cried Grandier, sitting up suddenly. Then he sank down again luxuriously in his chair. "Proceed, pray proceed. Ladies and gentlemen, the learned pig will now oblige with a little more of his wisdom. His knowledge of humanity—particularly of the fair sex—is illimitable. Go on, do. Where did you learn it all?"

"You may chaff as much as you like," said Arthur, flushed but standing his ground. "You know I don't care a hang. But when you talk as if the girl—I beg your pardon, as if Miss Brown—was to come crawling to your feet—why, it isn't worthy of you, that's all I can say."

"I wonder why I don't knock your head off?" mused Grandier lazily. "But if you weren't such a well-meaning idiot, I should have done it long ago. So I suppose you're safe for one more night. But you'll go too far one day, and then you'll get the biggest surprise you ever had in your life. Scoot!"

He half expected that Arthur would embark on some attempt at self-justification, but he merely remarked "'dNight!" and went out of the room thoughtfully. Grandier stole after him to remind him sarcastically that they were going out hawking on the morrow, and he had better not stay awake all night brooding over Miss Brown's wrongs, and then went to bed considerably cheered and refreshed by the passage of arms. But in the morning his dignity made it necessary for him to mark his sense of Noel's heartless behaviour by a suitable chilliness of demeanour, which involved leaving her to preside alone at the early tea on the verandah instead of offering to help her. Colonel Brown did not accept the company of his niece on a hunting expedition when he had any men to go with him, and she looked a little forlorn and unhappy, or so at least it seemed to kind Sir Robert. He stood beside her and talked as he drank his tea, out of sheer pity.

for her loneliness. Her uncle was lavishing fearful language on a crowd of hangers-on who had made up their minds to take part in the hunt, Miss Travis was wildly packing up breakfast and lunch for the hunters, with occasional distracted expeditions to look for something Colonel Brown could not find, and Grandier and Arthur, both in high excitement, were seeing that the horses were all right—or that was their own explanation—surrounded by grooms and horse-boys. Suddenly Noel's lips parted, and fear came into her eyes.

"Sir Robert," she said in a low voice, touching him on the arm, "look there! The man in the dirty coat!"

Interrupted in what he was saying, Sir Robert put down his cup, and looked in the direction she indicated.

"One of the syces? An active-looking fellow."

"I believe—it is Ismail Beg," she breathed low.

"I think so too. You know him, then?"

"Oh, of course I have peeped, when Uncle has been entertaining him. I call him Tony Lumpkin—he is such a curious wild swaggering creature. But don't you think he is trying to get among your servants and go with you? And after what he did yesterday——"

"That is the reason, I imagine. A sort of penance on the young gentleman's part, by way of gaining my favour. I don't think you need be afraid he will try any more tricks. He knows which side his bread is buttered—at least I hope so, for if he don't it's a poor look-out for all of us."

"Oh, if you think it is safe——" said Noel anxiously.

"I am sure it is. But it's very forgiving of you to take so much trouble about me, for I'm afraid my adventure interrupted an interesting confab yesterday, didn't it? I see a distinct look of injury about poor Grandier this morning."

"We are not engaged," said Noel. Her voice was a little sullen.

"Not officially—no. But I should be sorry if I thought a necessary precaution had made trouble between you. He is a very fine fellow, and with you to help him on, ought to do great things. Of course

he feels this delay, and even if he is a bit like a bear with a sore head, you must take it as a compliment, and do your best to make things better for him, not worse."

"If he told you I had been teasing him——" began Noel hotly, and stopped before Sir Robert's look of amazement.

"*Told—me?* My dear young lady!" Noel inspected the teapot closely, and put three lumps of sugar into it.

"Well, he said so, though it was only that he wouldn't understand, and I thought perhaps—— Sir Robert, do you think—I can't believe—do you really think I could ever make him happy?"

Not being a woman, Sir Robert failed to perceive that the question should really have run, "Do you think he could ever make me happy?" and he smiled very kindly at Noel as he answered, "If you couldn't, I should think him a very extraordinary young man, my dear child. And I don't think him extraordinary, you know—merely remarkable. Just have patience, and be as nice to him as you know how, and you'll see!"

"A new occupation for me—comforting love-lorn damsels!" he said to himself as he went down the steps; "I must tell Marian," and then he forgot the sentimental in the practical, and especially in considering the preparations for the day's sport. The hawking might more properly have been termed eagling, for the two birds which were carried, carefully hooded, by two of Colonel Brown's servants, were really golden eagles, of whose powers wonderful tales were told. The visitors were a little disappointed to find, when operations began, that the eagles were not trained to attack birds, and took no notice of them. Their game was gazelle or wild pig, and when a boar was sighted they gave a fine display of their methods, battering the prey about the head with their wings until he was too confused to escape. To minds accustomed to Indian ways it was an unpleasant anticlimax to find that no spears were provided, and that the death of the boar was accomplished by the heavy sticks of the beaters, and the whole thing seemed rather

unsportsmanlike. Colonel Brown had come to look upon it quite from the Pahari point of view, but he humoured the prejudices of his guests, and when a gazelle was seen, refrained from loosing an eagle to run it down. Wild geese, rock-pigeons and a bustard or two provided some good shooting after the midday halt, and the ragged crowd of hangers-on that accompanied the hunt was well laden on the return. Throughout the day the man whom Noel had pointed out stuck to Sir Robert with the utmost assiduity, holding his stirrup when he mounted or dismounted—an attention rather embarrassing than helpful—and always on the alert to render him any possible service. In Arthur and Grandier, ignorant of his identity, this devotion roused much amusement, but Colonel Brown's jerky manner, and his frequent side-glances at his guest's face, betrayed that he was in Ismail Beg's confidence. Consequently Sir Robert was not surprised when, after dinner, as the visitors were resting luxuriously before beginning their night-ride back to Khamish, his host approached him with an air of mystery.

"Ismail Beg sends his salaams, and asks if he may ride part of the way with you to-night," he said.

"After yesterday?" asked Sir Robert carelessly.

"No—after to-day. It was his own idea to run at your stirrup all day by way of showing his contrition. Very fine thought of the boy's, *I* think."

"I imagined that was the notion. At the same time, how does it purge the offence? He insults me grossly—his own idea; makes a fantastic exhibition of himself and me by way of reparation—also his own idea. But I am the person, surely, to dictate the form of the reparation?"

"You can't judge these fellows by European standards," said Colonel Brown angrily. "I got Ismail Beg to see that something had got to be done—and without much difficulty, but now that he has done it, I'm hanged if he'll do anything more."

"Then one of the competing candidates for the *gaddi* is eliminated. That simplifies matters considerably."



"Nonsense!" said Colonel Brown, a good deal taken aback. "You can't mean it?"

"I do mean it. What is the use of my attempting to push Ismail Beg's candidature if I can't depend on the man himself? I won't do it. Yesterday he had the impudence to try and test me. To-day I choose to test him. That is my last word."

"But what do you want him to do?"

"Before he comes into my presence, either here or out of doors, he must lay aside every vestige of a weapon that he has upon him. You will be good enough to see that he does it."

"He will never do it. It would compromise his dignity."

"Then let him keep up his dignity in exile, as before."

"He will think you want to murder him."

"Let him. If he has no more trust in me than that, how are we ever to work together? If I am prepared to ride with him unarmed, why should he come bristling with daggers and pistols like an Anatolian bandit?"

"He will never do it!" repeated Colonel Brown mournfully.

"Then, as I said, my task is simplified. He has failed to pass the test."

Colonel Brown went out sorrowfully, and when he returned, he made no further attempt to shake his guest's resolution. But when the moon had risen, and the party were about to start, he seized the opportunity, while Arthur went to look for Grandier, to remark in the most lugubrious of tones to Sir Robert:—

"He has ridden off in a rage, of course. I knew he would. No use expecting these fellows to do a thing like that."

"Then I am disappointed in him. But it simplifies things," said Sir Robert again, and Grandier appearing with Arthur at the moment, they bade farewell and rode away. But before they were out of sight of the house, the drumming of horse's feet was heard, as on the Sunday afternoon, and a huge black horse overtook them, and was pulled up at Sir Robert's side. The

rider threw apart the folds of his rainbow-tinted *choga* to show a girdle empty of weapons.

"I tested you yesterday, sahib, and you stood the test," he said in Turki. "To-day it is for you to test me."

"It is well," said Sir Robert. He had picked up a smattering of Turki in his prime, from the nomads who came down the Kunji to Shah Bagh, and had added largely to it since his arrival in Pahar. "We will ride apart from my company."

"Is it safe, sir?" asked Grandier quickly, in English.

"Perfectly safe. Why not?" and Sir Robert drew his horse aside out of the line, and signed to Ismail Beg to fall in beside him in the rear. The youth reminded him much more of an Englishman than the sedate Indians among whom so much of his life had been spent—he was so obviously embarrassed, half delighted by the thought of his prank and half ashamed of it—and his eyes betrayed his thoughts, unlike the inscrutable orbs to the south of the passes. To set him at his ease, Sir Robert made some polite remark about the black horse, which drew forth the delighted reply that the Beg had trained his steed himself, and loved him better than anything else in the world.

"That is the word of a boy," said Sir Robert severely. "A man should take pleasure in greater matters."

"As I would fain have done," was the sullen answer. "But it was forbidden me."

"You were accused of aiming at the *gaddi*?"

"So it was declared to my father by my brother. Yet, sahib, I did but seek to stir up the people against the Sinites, who were encroaching on our eastern border, and had claimed and received territory which has been ours since the days of my grandfather—upon whom be peace!"

"But that involved criticism of the Khan's government, which had yielded the territory and failed to provide for the defence of the frontier."

## 106. England hath Need of Thee

"So I saw when it was too late, sahib. I had thought only of saving the kingdom, but as your honour says, the fault lay with our own house. I was sent away to Aksang, and for once I rejoiced that I had a brother, since death or a dungeon must have been my portion had my father not been unwilling to leave him a free hand."

"And at Aksang—how do you spend your time?"

The sullen tone returned. "As one who plays the fool because any show of wisdom may cost him his life, sahib. The officials, the garrison, all are spies upon me. While I pass my days in horse-racing and cock-fighting, and lavish gifts upon dancing-girls, I am safe, but if I seek to take any part in the defence or government of the district, I am repulsed, those to whom I speak assuring me that my friendship is a danger to them. There are certain Hindu traders with whom I am permitted to associate in peace"—Sir Robert knew that these were sure to be money-lenders, who would be supposed to desire the young man's degradation as a means of getting him deeper into their clutches—"and these will often arrange a nautch or other entertainment in my honour. But since they dread the advance of Sinim as much as I do, we are wont under cover of these shows to discuss the troubles of the time, and from the Hindus I have learnt that nothing can save us but the spreading of the skirt of the Sarkar over our land."

"Then you would be willing to do your part to save Pahar from the Sinites?"

"What can I do, sahib? I must not fight, I must not lead the defence—what is there left to do?"

"It is part of my duty here," said Sir Robert abruptly, "to organise defence. I have it in my mind to set the men of my escort to drill part of the Pahari army as they themselves have been drilled. With one regiment trained thus, and properly armed, there would be a standard to which the rest of the troops might learn to aspire. Will you join in this effort?"

"But Hasrat would never allow me to command a regiment—above all, such a regiment!"

"There is no question of commanding it. Will you be the first recruit?"

Surprise and resentment mingled in Ismail Beg's expression, the curttness of the question offending him almost as much as its nature astonished him. But Sir Robert had not lost the magnetic power which in his old days on the frontier had enlisted hordes of former enemies under his banner, and after his first doubtful glance the young man replied fervently, "Your honour may enrol me when you will if I may be your own *makhram* (orderly) in earnest, as I was your syce to-day for a jest."

"It will mean hard work and hard living," Sir Robert warned him. "You must count the cost before you enlist, for if you join, it will be as an example to your people. These men of Khamish care nothing for the fate of their country so long as they can enjoy their comfortable houses and good clothes, and live sumptuously at cookshops which are the admiration of Asia. The Sinites may raid up to the borders of the irrigated land round the city, and the comfortable people within will not bestir themselves until their supplies are cut off—and then it will be too late. But if they see that their Khan's son thinks it worth while to give up all this for the sake of guarding his country, it may rouse them to help themselves, and so be worthy of help from England. It is not for me to say what is determined, but of this I am sure, that the Sarkar will lift no hand to save a people that is not worth saving."

"I am ready, sahib. Shall I enter the city with you to-night?"

"No, I must first obtain permission for you to return, lest it should be supposed you have designs upon the state. You are in communication with Colonel Brown—Istākis Beg, I mean? Then I will send you a message by him to-morrow or the next day."

"This plan—is it suggested by Istākis Beg, sahib?" Sir Robert looked round, surprised at the change of tone, which implied suspicion, if no more.

"Certainly not. Istākis Beg knows nothing of it. Why do you fear him? He has done very much for Pahar, and not least in seeking help for it from England."

"I know that, sahib, and it is for that very reason I distrust him. It has been whispered to me that in return for these services he desires me as a husband for his niece." Sir Robert almost laughed outright at the absurdity of attributing to poor Colonel Brown a project diametrically opposed to all his views and wishes; but Ismail Beg continued quite seriously, "When I heard this, I found opportunity to see the maiden, and I do not choose to marry her. She does not please me. She is pale and puny, with light eyes and no eyebrows." This was a cruel libel, but Sir Robert, remembering the bold eyes and heavily blacked eyebrows of the strapping maidens of Khamish, could hardly wonder that the young man failed to find beauty in Noel's little pale face, with its great grey eyes and delicately pencilled brows. At the same time, true to the code of a lifetime, he disapproved highly of Ismail Beg's venturing to contemplate marriage with her as even a possibility, and it gave him great pleasure to reply repressively.

"The lady—Istākis Beg's niece—is already betrothed to an officer of the Sarkar's army."

The oddest mixture of astonishment, relief, and a tinge of disappointment was visible in Ismail Beg's face. "Then why does Istākis Beg speak so often of the greatness of his influence with the Sarkar and the great benefits he has conferred upon Pahar?" he asked blankly.

"Lest you should fail to realise them, I imagine. It is quite true that it is through the influence of his writings I am here."

"Then he speaks the truth? I thought he desired

## Ismail Beg

to magnify his services that he might establish a claim upon me."

"In that you were quite mistaken, you see. Otherwise I think you are fairly well matched. The services have been rendered, no doubt, but you won't be allowed to forget them. And now you must come no further, for I see the minarets of Khamish in the far distance. Return to your place, wherever it is, and keep in touch with Istākis Beg until I send you word. Peace be with you!"

"And with you peace, sahib!" Ismail Beg drew aside and bowed, then set spurs to his horse and rode back furiously along the road they had come, while Sir Robert rode forward to join Grandier and Arthur.

"It did her no end of good," the former had just confided to the latter, moved to confession by the moonlight, perhaps—"saying what I did yesterday, I mean, and keeping away from her this morning. She was quite different to-night—said she was sorry she had hurt my feelings. I told her we should have her behaving like an ordinary decent Christian yet, and she said she would try. She's a quite too awfully nice little girl—a hundred times too good for me!"

## CHAPTER IX.

## MANŒUVRING FOR POSITION.

THERE was a surprise awaiting Sir Robert when he entered the Elchi Khana, in the shape of a further supply of letters, a second *dakchi*<sup>1</sup> having arrived since his departure, who had become separated from the first in crossing the mountains. Additional letters and newspapers from home were welcome, but the chief item was a letter from Mr Brancepath, evidently written off hurriedly when Sir Robert's application for a survey party had been received at Simla. Its manner was curt in the extreme, and its matter unsatisfactory, for it advised Sir Robert to lay aside any idea of delimiting the Sino-Pahari boundary. It was quite out of the question that a party should be sent, for the Government did not intend to make itself responsible for Pahar, and the sooner the Mission could settle matters there and return the better.

There was something very perplexing about the communication. Clearly it was not an official letter, for it was not written in proper form. Presumably, then, it was in the nature of a friendly warning, from one who believed himself to be in the confidence of the Government, and desired to save Sir Robert the disappointment of making recommendations which would not be accepted. But if this was the case, Mr Brancepath was signally mistaken in his estimate of the man with whom he had to deal, as well as

<sup>1</sup> Postman, Hind. *dakwallah*.

ignorant of the Government's intention. Sir Robert was not likely to be deterred from acting up to the full scope of his instructions by an unofficial intimation that such a course would be officially agreeable. The only effect of the letter was to hasten the despatch of his preliminary report on the condition of Pahar, which it had been arranged was to be sent off as soon as he could get a fair grasp of the problems involved. Hitherto he had been unable to speak on the important point of Ismail Beg's personality, but now this gap could be filled.

There was need for haste, for the Envoy's apparent indecision was causing unrest beyond the borders of Pahar. The Viceroy of the nearest Sinite province had sent his felicitations to the Elchi Beg on his safe arrival at Khamish, with a polite request to be informed of the date when the British occupation was to be proclaimed, that he might give himself the pleasure of sending a representative to the ceremony—which he was kind enough to say would set at rest for ever the minds of the Sinite authorities on what had always been a troublesome and often a dangerous neighbour. The veiled threat that if England failed to annex Pahar Sinim would do so could hardly have been more delicately conveyed, nor the assurance that though a British occupation might not be particularly welcome, Sinim was quite prepared to acquiesce in it. Therefore Sir Robert felt no difficulty in urging upon Her Majesty's Government the advisability of making Pahar, if not an integral part of the Empire, at least a protected state, since the step was warmly desired by the ruler and the majority of the inhabitants, and while it put an end to the present anomalous state of affairs, would meet with no opposition from the other government principally interested.

Since, however, his functions were nominally advisory merely, Sir Robert was obliged to take into account the possibility of England's declining to add to her responsibilities by occupying Pahar. The alternative of disclaiming any interest in the fate of



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the Khanate he rejected altogether, for it was totally inconsistent with the instructions given him, and the admitted necessity of keeping Sinim at a distance from the Bala border. There remained therefore only the policy of strengthening Pahar to serve as a buffer state, not merely with regard to Sinim on the north-east, but to Scythia on the north-west, and he put forward the various means of doing so which had thus far suggested themselves to him. Under its present ruler it was practically impossible that the Khanate should ever recover sufficient vigour to stand alone, but it was fortunate that he was in no way opposed to placing himself under British tutelage. It would be well for the paramount power to select one of his sons as his successor, and endeavour to fit him for his future position. It was Sir Robert's present opinion that Ismail Beg's character showed the most promise, but he would report further when he had had him under closer observation for a time.

Then came the recommendations which Sir Robert could not disguise from himself would test the sincerity of the assurances with which he had been sent out. For some years—five at least—Pahar must be treated as a protected state even if it was not one technically. The army must be reorganised, and besides the necessary instructors, a sufficient force must be sent to keep the peace until it was fit for use. An alternative, though an undesirable one, was to keep at Raiyati for the five years the force now there, as a gentle warning to the Sinites not to encroach. This would at least relieve the Government from the necessity of employing Indian troops beyond the borders of India, but Pahar as a station was far preferable to Raiyati both as regarded health and morality. But however the military difficulty might be settled, one thing was certain, that the services of a number of young British officers, seconded from their respective corps, would be needed for the regeneration of the country—administrative, judicial, agricultural, commercial. No doubt Sir Robert was

old-fashioned in making this request, but it would have been impossible for him to believe that there could be a better method of re-creating Pahar. It carried him back to the days thirty-five years ago, when Colonel Gerrard and he had formed part of the "band of brothers" labouring under Edmund Antony for the rebuilding of Granthistan. How they had worked to set the kingdom on its feet, trying to save it in spite of itself, until the treachery of its rulers and its own inherent weakness proved that the only possible remedy was the stern medicine of British rule! And what men they had been—Edmund Antony with his hatred of oppression, his confidence in the natives, his prophetic insight; his brother James with his devastating common-sense and autocratic decisiveness; Ronaldson, of the "imperial air," whose monument was Delhi; Brooks, Walters, Carpenter, Shorer, Horace Arbuthnot—was there ever such a gallant company? And all gone now—Edmund Antony, heroic in failure, buried a quarter of a century ago among the battered ruins of the Residency at Parasganj; James, full of years and honours, carried only the other day to his resting-place in the Abbey. Only two left, Hal Gerrard and himself, and opening out before them a task like the old task. There was something for them to do still, old though they were. England called upon them yet once more to set about the establishment of peace and good faith and good government in a troubled land where no one could trust his neighbour, and to do it in the spirit of the great days that were gone.

"Yes, sir?" hinted Grandier delicately. He had waited in vain for Sir Robert to finish dictating, and was growing concerned. Had some consideration suddenly occurred to him that vitiated all the arguments gone before? But Sir Robert laughed shamefacedly.

"Wool-gathering, Grandier! A bad habit—don't do to let it get hold of one. It's a queer thing that now I am back on my own ground, so to speak, all

that comes between—Lodovick and the bad time that followed—seems to be a sort of dream, and Darwan and Shah Bagh and the Mutiny feel like yesterday. And to have the same chance again now——! Well, mustn't waste time. Must rub it in a bit about the survey party."

It was of course impossible to allude to Mr Brancepath's unofficial letter and the practical refusal it had contained, but Sir Robert set forth that he felt bound to repeat with all possible earnestness his request for a proper delimitation of the Pahar frontier. However well disposed the two governments might be, unpleasant incidents were bound to occur if no one knew exactly where Pahar left off and Sinim began, and it was particularly important to avoid such incidents if there was to be a probationary period. So important did Sir Robert feel it that he would have despatched one of his own officers to make at any rate a preliminary survey, had there not been an even more urgent task awaiting him in the south-west, where there seemed every hope of discovering a quicker and easier route across the mountains direct from British territory. "And let's hope that'll fix 'em!" said Sir Robert, dictating no longer. "Some people are quite ready to do their duty if you can show them how to do it on the cheap."

The report was duly despatched, but before Grandier could depart on the south-western expedition, there was the question of Ismail Beg to be settled, since at present the only link with him was Colonel Brown at Khush Urda. Sir Robert informed the Dadkhwah of his interview with the young man, and asked him to arrange an audience of the Khan in which he might apply for the decree of banishment to be rescinded. Niaz Beg approved highly of the return, but thought it would be much better to bring it about without troubling his master. The Khan was already dissatisfied because he saw no sign of the golden harvest he had expected to reap immediately upon the Envoy's arrival, and an interview with him, even if it was

granted at all, was not likely to be of an agreeable character. But Sir Robert persisted. It was most important to have the outlawry formally reversed, for otherwise Ismail Beg's life would be at the mercy of any one who cared to curry favour with Aga Mohammed Beg and the pro-Sinite party by killing him. The Dadkhwah went to his master unwillingly, but returned wreathed in smiles. The Khan regretted that his health made it impossible for him to receive the Elchi Beg again at present, but he was glad to think that public business need not suffer, since the possession of his signet conferred on Sir Robert all needed authority. In the matter of Ismail Beg, which the Dadkhwah had ventured with many qualms to introduce, it appeared that it had been necessary to use guile.

"I told Hasrat," confessed the old man, with a comical attempt at compunction which it was clear he did not feel, "that the scandal of the youth's manner of life at Aksang had reached even to your Excellency's ears, and could not be suffered to continue, lest the favour of the Sarkar should be withdrawn from the princely house. Thereupon Hasrat demanded whether the Elchi Beg desired the death of the young man, for that he would not feel disposed to grant, though he would throw him into a dungeon if that would satisfy you. When I said that in the benevolence of your heart your honour proposed to effect the Beg's reformation under colour of punishing him, Hasrat was moved to laughter, but consented at last to permit the attempt to be made—though privately, for fear of bringing scorn upon the state. The youth may be enrolled in the regiment to be trained after the manner of Europe, but under another name, and he must lodge within these walls and be in close attendance upon yourself, for only thus can he be kept from disgracing the throne by the excesses to which he has always been inclined. Nor must he try to see his father's face until he is summoned, nor thrust himself into public affairs. These are the conditions of his return."

"I hardly like to bring him back under such a

stigma—largely undeserved,” said Sir Robert. “It is likely to prejudice him in the future. Otherwise I could not ask a better chance for him.”

The Dadkhwah smiled knowingly. “When Ismail Beg mounts the *gaddi*—far be the day!—your honour may safely leave him to deal with the question of his past, for we of Pahar knew that it is not well to remember what a prince desires to be forgotten,” he said. “Therefore let your Excellency be pleased to affix the royal seal to this decree I have prepared, recalling the Beg from his exile, and I will lay it up in secret, ready to be brought out should any challenge his presence in the city, but on no account to be promulgated in public.”

Sir Robert was not satisfied, but the delight of the subterranean procedure he described seemed to have taken possession of the Dadkhwah's mind, and it appeared as if there was no other way of bringing Ismail Beg back to Khamish. Therefore, when Colonel Brown rode in from Khush Urda to take his journey westwards with Grandier, he brought among his servants a young man called Sabir Aklund, riding a very fine black horse, and desirous above all things of enlisting in the New Model regiment. Him Sir Robert honoured by choosing him as his personal orderly, and a small space partitioned off from the verandah was assigned to him as sleeping quarters. Nominally this arrangement was for the Envoy's protection, but it needed no special insight to see that it also ensured the princely orderly's safety, in so far as that could be brought about in Khamish.

It was rather a shock to the members of the Mission to discover that Colonel Brown, without a qualm, was leaving his niece and Miss Travis at Khush Urda while he guided Grandier to his pass. Their astonishment he took rather in the light of a personal injury.

“Why, what should happen to them?” he demanded. “They have often been left there before, when I have been shooting in the northern mountains, and didn't want to drag a pack of women along with me.”      - -

"Raids are always possible," said Sir Robert. "You are not so very far from the Sinite frontier, and the nomadic tribes respect no frontier at all."

"I should like to see the Sinite or the tribesman that would lay hands on any one belonging to me!" cried Colonel Brown ferociously. "My good sir, they daren't! They know me, or if they don't, they have heard about me."

"If you think that is sufficient protection——" Sir Robert could not help reflecting that most of the Colonel's acquaintances seemed irresistibly impelled to put his pretensions to the test. It was unfortunate that, to the ordinary mind, his language appeared so notably to exceed his powers.

"Abundant protection, sir. There's my old steward, a well-known fighting man, and plenty of well-armed servants to defend them besides, if that ain't enough. Anybody attacking Khush Urda will find it a jolly tough nut to crack, I can tell you! You surely don't suggest that I should have burdened myself with two women on this journey?"

"It might have been possible to leave them in Khamish, surely? We might even have had them here——" Sir Robert made the suggestion with hesitation, for he had no wish to introduce an apple of discord, in the shape of an attractive girl, among his followers. But Colonel Brown had no intention whatever of adopting it.

"Quite out of the question," he said. "Should never dream of allowing it. Grandier away, too. No, Sir Robert, thank you all the same, but Noel will stay where she is with her governess. I have laid out a pretty stiff scheme of reading for her, and when I get back I shall examine her in it. You see, I have taken to heart what you said about her want of schooling——the astonished Sir Robert searched his memory in vain——" and I mean to keep her nose to the grindstone with a vengeance until she marries. I am much obliged to you for pointing out to me what was lacking. She has shown a bad spirit at times—a very nasty



## 118 England hath Need of Thee

temper—and it has got to be worked out of her. She knows what I expect of her, and Miss Travis knows too, and if she don't keep her to her studies she'll go."

"I'm afraid Miss Brown will bear a grudge against me," said Sir Robert. "And really, I have no idea——"

"She had better!" cried Colonel Brown, in high scorn. "You can't expect gratitude from her, probably, though poor Grandier ought to be grateful to you to the day of his death for drawing my attention to the way she was ruining her character. If you will believe me, that girl, with the finest private library in Asia at her command, was reading nothing but the books that were absolutely useless—poetry and novels! But I have put a stop to that now. She will read books that will do her some good—the books that have made me what I am."

"You would hardly wish a young lady to resemble you exactly?" said Sir Robert, outwardly grave.

"Why, no, of course she ought to have been a boy. It's a sad pity, but that can't be helped." Sir Robert felt a passing wonder as to what kind of boy the Colonel's system would have produced, even if any conceivable boy could have been prevailed upon to submit to it for a week. "But what everybody ought to know is their place in the scheme of creation. Noel's place ain't my place, of course, nor anything like it—not many men even, if I may say it, can put things so forcibly as to enable the *Times* to change the whole policy of Her Majesty's Government"—poor Colonel Brown was happily unaware of the extent to which his letters had been edited, as of the fact that he had offered them at the very moment when there was urgent need of a stick with which to beat the Government—"but there's all the more need for her to know it. Grandier will find half his work done for him."

"Work of a disciplinary nature, I presume?"

"Just so. I have mapped out all her time. So many hours' solid reading in the morning; in the

afternoon Miss Travis questions her on her morning's studies; in the evening they discuss over their needlework what has been read. I have insisted on the needlework, and I will say this for Miss Travis, she has the whole thing at her fingers' ends—not like the women who leave everything to the *dirzee*. Noel is to have half a dozen shirts and pairs of socks ready for me when I come back. The worst of it is, I can never wear those hand-worked things—conscientiously made, as Miss Travis puts it—they are so abominably rough and scratchy—but I can give 'em away, and they need never know. The moral effect is the same."

"It strikes me," said Sir Robert, "that Miss Noel will be inclined to rush into matrimony merely for the sake of escaping all this hard work."

Colonel Brown beamed. "My idea precisely!" he said. "Then she'll be off my mind."

Quite unconscious of the powerful influence at work in his favour, Crandier was giving directions to Arthur for looking after Noel in his absence.

"You can ride over sometimes—say once a fortnight—and see how she is going on," he said. "I'd rather you went yourself, for I don't want Harmar saying that he has seen a black circle round Noel's head, and it means that either she or I will die within the year." Harmar's painstaking enquiries of the Dadkhwah and others as to whether a murder had ever taken place in the Elchi Khana had come to the knowledge of his fellows, and had not added to his popularity, any more than his suggestion that the mysterious shadow he discerned over the place might relate to a tragedy in the future rather than in the past. "I shall put in a letter for her whenever we send off a *dakchi*, of course, and you can take them on, and if there doesn't happen to be one when the time comes, I am leaving one or two little things wrapped up, with a note inside, so that there will always be something."

"I say, you think of everything!" said Arthur, with heartfelt admiration.

"It's necessary," said Grandier gloomily. "If a girl like that once gets the idea that you aren't thinking of her every moment of the day and night, it's all up with you. Be sure you tell her that you had to come and see her because I couldn't be satisfied without knowing how she was."

"Rather! and I'll praise you up to her no end; don't be afraid."

"Well, be careful what you say. Don't make her sick of my very name. Do it delicately, discreetly."

But this was beyond Arthur, and Grandier had to depart with the assurance that at all events nothing that goodwill could do would be wanting. When he and Colonel Brown had started, with a long train of servants and pack-ponies, for the country towards the west was largely wild and hilly, and only inhabited by nomadic tribes, Sir Robert and the rest of the Mission settled down to a sort of Indian hot-weather existence, for the heat was little less than it would have been in Granthistan. Upon Sir Robert's shoulders fell the burden of the judicial duties which had hitherto devolved upon the representative of the Resident in Bala, and the clamorous and litigious horde of Hindus who were seeking fortune in Pahar kept his mornings fully employed. They seemed to have penetrated into every nook and corner of the country, and every one of them, no matter what his original calling, seemed to turn a more or less dishonest penny by money-lending as a means of adding to his income. In this respect the country was virgin soil, for the Paharis, as Mohammedans, were forbidden usury, but the Hindus managed to raise a fruitful crop of quarrels among themselves, with their clients, and with a few favoured Sinite immigrants who were allowed to sojourn in Khamish under the protection of Aga Mohammed Beg. The only relief to the sordid occupation of judging between them, and the little less distasteful business of enquiring into the state finances, or the lack of them, was found in the training of the new regiment, which had now its full comple-

ment, and was shaping excellently. Sir Robert was very anxious to raise a second, of light cavalry this time, but the horsemen of the northern plains, who were the ideal material for his purpose, were slow to enlist. Putting it bluntly, they wanted guarantees as to the permanence of the present state of things before they compromised their independence so far. They had no mind to be wasted in bolstering up the decaying power of the Khanate against the overwhelming strength of Sinim, but once assured that Britain was behind the Khan, they would come in their thousands. They sent deputations to interview Sir Robert and try to entrap him into the definite statements which he must not make, and he visited their camps and revived his recollections of old days in Darwan.

"If we do stay here, and I can raise this body of horse," he said to his nephew one evening, as they rode back to Khamish in the moonlight after a tremendous gallop with a horde of wild horsemen, over hedge and ditch, bush and brier, which was called a hunt, but of which the noise must have frightened away all the game for miles round, "I shall feel inclined to leave the cares of the state to your father for about half the year, and go into camp with these fellows. What I could make of them if I had the chance!—beat the Cossacks to fits. Not that I shall be able to do it, of course—too old and stiff. You young fellows have all the luck nowadays; hope you'll take it."

## CHAPTER X.

## THE FUGITIVES.

A WILD clamour outside the gate of the Elchi Khana one morning, long before the hour had arrived for hearing cases, disturbed Sir Robert at his *choti haziri*, and caused him to send Sabir Akhund to see what was wrong. The youth came back perplexed. All the Indians in Khamish were there in the street, he said, and they were crying and complaining and protesting, but in the turmoil no one could make out the reason. Some of them demanded to see the Envoy, while others heaped maledictions on his head, and the people of the city were much amused by their plight. Calling up the Tracker havildar, who possessed lungs of iron, Sir Robert sent him to quell the tumult and bring in representatives of the mob to state their grievances. The voice of authority prevailed, and when five of the chief Hindus were ushered in, their truculence had given way to lamentation. Yet they were bitterly reproachful as they upbraided Sir Robert for deceiving them. He had made them think that England had come to Pahar to stay, and they had sent for their families from India and extended their businesses regardless of expense, besides opening branch establishments in provincial towns, in full expectation of reaping a modest return upon their outlay, under the protection of the Sarkar. Drily remarking that any definite statements as to the duration of his stay in Pahar had been made solely

by themselves, Sir Robert enquired what had happened to blight this fair prospect of thriving and expanding trade. The question seemed both to surprise and embarrass the deputation, and it was some time before he could get out of them that every one was saying the Mission was to be withdrawn at once, and all the British Indians in Pahar abandoned to the tender mercies of the Sinites. Cross-examined as to the origin of the report, none of them could say whence it arose; it had simply become current in the bazar, no one knew how. Assured by Sir Robert that no order for the withdrawal of the Mission had been received, and none was likely to be issued, while it would certainly not depart without giving every British subject the choice between returning to India under adequate protection or remaining in Pahar with a consul to look after him, they were rather ashamed. When they united finally in declaring that the rumour must have been circulated by their Sinite rivals expressly to discredit them, they were told that any discredit attaching to them was due entirely to their own unreasoning panic, and recommended to discover which of their number had been the first to give credence to the report, and bring him up for public rebuke. Then they were dismissed, and retired crest-fallen, leaving Sir Robert more disquieted by their assertions than he had cared to let them see.

"You don't know as well as I do how news spreads in these countries," he said to his staff, who did not dream of imagining that the rumour might possibly be well founded. "No one knows how things get about—through the air, some people say—but they often know them before we do. If this thing was inherently possible, I shouldn't doubt that they had got hold of it somehow, but I hope—I believe—it's not possible. In that case we shall hear no more about it, and I only trust it may be so."

But the rumour had still some work to do—in the direction, incidentally, of upsetting Colonel Brown's elaborate schemes for the improvement of Noel's mind.

Two days later, when Sir Robert went out for his morning ride with Arthur and the Doctor, they found Khamish agog with reports of a Sinite invasion, and made an early call on the Dadkhwah to see if there was any truth in them. Apparently all was well, and after arranging for the despatch of heralds to reassure the people, the Envoy continued his ride, choosing, naturally enough, an easterly direction, since any trouble would arise from that quarter. They stayed out later than usual, going as far as the limits of the cultivated land, and finding the inhabitants disturbed and distrustful, but not yet at the point of abandoning their farms and taking refuge in the city. It was already very hot when they halted beyond the farthest field, and looked out across the sands in the direction of Khush Urda, but Sir Robert was loath to return.

"I don't like to think of Miss Travis and Miss Brown alone out there," he said. "Even if nothing happens, the rumours must be horribly alarming. Brown may say what he likes about the terror of his name keeping the place safe, but if there is a man in Pahar that the Sinites have reason to hate it's himself."

"Shall I ride over there, sir, and see if they're all right?" suggested Arthur.

"Not now; it would only mean sunstroke. But to-night you might take two or three sowars and——" he broke off suddenly. "What's that? a dust devil, or——?"

A cloud of dust was visible far across the shimmering surface of the desert, which might be one of the curious whirlwinds, akin to waterspouts at sea, that sweep up the loose-lying sand and hurry it along like a moving pillar. But this dust-cloud lacked the circular form given by the whirlwind, and seemed to hang in the heavy air for some distance. Below it moving figures became dimly visible.

"Fugitives!" said Sir Robert. "Come on!"

Dr Lakeney put out a restraining hand. "Let me ride ahead, sir, and see what it is. If the Sinites are on the warpath, no need for you to risk your life:"

Sir Robert laughed. "My eyes are better for the desert than yours still, Doctor. If those are Sinites, they are running away from somebody as fast as they can."

"Gees look pretty well fagged out," said Arthur, as they rode forward, noticing the plunging gait of the approaching horses.

"Looks as if there were ladies there," said Dr Lakeney incredulously. "Can it be your Khush Urda friends, sir?"

It was. As the two parties met, Miss Travis and Noel, fagged, worn and dusty, dropped their reins with little sobs of relief. Miss Travis was rather inconsequently attired in a topi and a dressing-gown, and held the great cat Bumpus resolutely under her arm. Noel wore a picturesque braided riding-habit evidently modelled on that of Di Vernon, but the skirt was put on back in front and the coat buttoned awry. Their attendants were four or five wild-looking Paharis, as travel-stained as themselves, and the horses of all seemed to be at their last gasp.

"My dear Miss Travis, what has happened?" cried Sir Robert, dismounting and throwing his bridle to Sabir Akhund. Miss Travis made a great effort to answer, but wept instead. It could not be said that she burst into tears, for she had not the strength left to do anything so violent, but the tears rolled down her face, and her lips trembled too much to speak.

"It was the Sinites," said Noel, in an exhausted voice.

"They came to us in the night," gasped Miss Travis, bringing out the words in a kind of scream, with horrible distortions of countenance—"told us we must escape at once—we could take nothing—ridden ever since—never stopped."

"The Sinites came to you in the night?" asked Sir Robert incredulously.

"No, Zaman Khan—the steward. Oh, it has been so dreadful!—but we have a great deal to be thankful for."



"Poor darling Travy is scratched to pieces—where Bumpus has been holding on," said Noel, with a weak little laugh.

"Oh, please let us go on. I shall fall off in another moment," murmured Miss Travis, her eyes closing. Sir Robert jumped.

"No, no!" he said sharply. "You must hold out a little longer, please. If you change horses——"

"If I once get off, I shall never be able to get up again," said Miss Travis, with the resolution of despair.

"Oh yes, you will. We will change your saddle to my nephew's horse, which will not be nearly so tiring for you, and Miss Noel shall have mine. I will ride Sabir Akhund's."

Not even the inertia of utter fatigue could prevent Miss Travis from responding to the note of command, and she and Noel were helped off, and collapsed weakly on the sand. While the saddles were being changed, Sir Robert catechized the Pahari servants, but they could tell him little. The steward Zaman Khan had received a warning that the British Mission was leaving Pahar immediately, and that the Sinites were advancing to take possession of the country. He had therefore hurried off the two ladies to catch up the Elchi Beg and secure his protection, lest his master's honour should be for ever blighted by their falling into the hands of his foes, and his henchmen plumed themselves on having obeyed their orders so exactly that they had never once slackened rein all night. Having accomplished their task, they proposed to return at once to reinforce Zaman Khan, who was presumably holding out with the rest of the servants against the innumerable hordes of Sinim. The whole thing had the urgency and lack of reason of a bad dream, and Sir Robert felt inclined to laugh.

"You can't possibly return at once," he said, "for your horses would die under you. Rest during the day at the farmhouse there, and at sunset I will send a messenger and troopers to go with you and see what

help is needed. You see that I have no thought of departing from Khamish, and the whole rumour may be equally false."

"Oh dear, I hope not!" sighed poor Miss Travis, as he turned to replace her in the saddle, with his nephew's help. "To have gone through so much—and been so terribly frightened—and all for nothing!"

"Oh, Travy, you horror!" cried Noel, a little shrilly. "You would rather the house was destroyed and all the servants killed than that there should have been a mistake!"

Sir Robert withered her with a glance. "Miss Travis has passed through a great strain," he said repressively, "and it affects you in one way and her in another. Do you feel equal to getting as far as Khamish, Miss Travis? I think we could make you more comfortable at the Elchi Khana, but we will see that the farm people do their best for you, if you prefer to halt there for the day."

"Oh, the Mission, please!" entreated Miss Travis, who was crying again. "We shall feel so much safer. Oh dear, Sir Robert, it is worth all we have gone through to find you and everybody so kind at the end!"

"Ride on, Arthur," said Sir Robert, "and get rooms ready for the ladies as far as you can. They will excuse deficiencies at first, I know, and we can add improvements by degrees. Take Karm-ud-din's horse."

Arthur was incommoded by the fact that he held in his arms Bumpus, who had passed from resentment to embarrassing fondness, and whose attentions had nearly knocked his helmet off. As he approached to give him back to his mistress, Noel held out her arms.

"Give him to me," she said. "Poor Travy has carried him all night. I was a little beast just now, but I suppose I am tired too."

"Lead your horses!" said Sir Robert sharply to the Paharis. "They have carried you far enough. And lead the ladies' horses," he added to the orderlies,

recalling, not without a tinge of pleasure, Ismail Beg's slighting reference to Noel when he saw the look on his face called forth by finding himself bidden to walk that she might ride. "Will you take care of Miss Brown, Doctor?"

Arthur galloped off ahead, and the rest made their way more slowly to the farm, where the Paharis and all the worn-out horses were left, and thence back to the Elchi Khana. Miss Travis and Noel retained their seats with difficulty, and not even the excitement caused by their appearance, which lined the streets with eagerly interested faces, could keep their eyes open. They were more asleep than awake when they rode in through the low gateway, and a sigh of relief was their only tribute to the peace and silence of the inner courtyard, where Arthur and Harmar were waiting to do the honours, having made all the preparations that goodwill coupled with entire ignorance, and hampered by almost total lack of material, could suggest to them. They had bundled Arthur and Grandier's possessions into the quarters occupied by the other two men, raided all the rooms and luggage impartially for such comforts and luxuries as the circumstances afforded, and induced one of the Pahari servants, by promises not unmingled with threats, to bring his wife, in a state of abject terror, to wait upon the ladies. They had also ordered a meal, mindful of the fact that a draught of milk at the farm would be all that the fugitives had had since the day before, and were inclined to feel wounded when Miss Travis and Noel, without even glancing at it, stumbled uncertainly across the verandah, and disappeared into the care of the frightened Pahari woman. Over this good lady an instantaneous change passed when she realised the purpose for which her services were required, and from a suppliant she became a tyrant, warning off imaginary intruders with resolute mien from the neighbourhood of her charges, and demanding such stillness that Sir Robert himself became guiltily conscious that his spurs clanked. . . .

That night Arthur and Harmar rode out with the sowars and with fresh horses for the servants, whom they picked up at the farm. Until they reached Khush Urda they found no trace of any invasion, and were almost inclined to think that the whole story of the Sinite advance must be due to a hallucination on Zaman Khan's part, but when they came in sight of the oasis it was clear that there had been at any rate a raid. The house was destroyed, with the exception of a squat stone-built tower, which formed the *daulatkhana* or storehouse, the garden devastated, and hasty efforts had even been made to block up the irrigation-channels from the reservoir. Happily the ingenuity of the raiders was inferior to their malice, or else they were deficient in explosives, for irreparable damage might have been done had they been able to blow up the massive wall which retained the water at the foot of the valley. As it was, however, Zaman Khan and his subordinates, released from their captivity in the *daulatkhana*, which they had successfully held, were already setting to work to clear the channels. The efforts of the enemy had been directed rather to plunder and destruction than to bloodshed. In his overweening confidence in the terror inspired by his name, Colonel Brown had not troubled to make his house defensible. The walls of the *daulatkhana* were immensely thick, and the windows few, small, and close under the roof, but it was designed for protection against burglars rather than an attacking force. By piling up the boxes and packages inside to stand on, Zaman Khan was able to fire a shot or two when the enemy came in sight, but he could not hold both sides of the tower simultaneously, and once under the shelter of the house the enemy had things all their own way. It was clear that they had gone through the rooms with the utmost thoroughness, taken whatever pleased them, and torn up or broken what seemed to them useless. When they departed, they set fire to the house, and got away scot-free under cover of the smoke.

"But who were they?" asked Arthur of Zaman Khan, when the old man had told his tale with modest pride. He was a Mohammedan from the Agpur district, who had followed his master in his wanderings for years, and identified himself with his fortunes.

"Who shall say, sahib? Thieving tribesmen, this humble one would have judged them, but how should such scum have dared to lift a finger against the servants of Istākis Sahib? Moreover, the message that came to me beforehand, fastened to an arrow shot from the hills, made mention of the Amban of the Sinites and his soldiers."

"But they were not regular troops?"

"Far from it, sahib. Yet who shall say that there were not regular troops behind them? What if the Amban, cloaking the face of covetousness with the veil of prudence, sent forward the tribesmen to discover whether there was a safe way for himself?"

"But why send you a warning?"

"Again who shall say, sahib? To frighten this humble one and the servant-people from their duty, or to discover whether the tale of the Eichi Beg's departure were true, or both? At least, there seems little doubt that they pursued the household and their guards to within sight of Khamish, and returned only on perceiving your honour's illustrious kinsman and his attendants, for it was the return of a party from that direction that caused the evil-doers to set the house on fire and depart."

Arthur felt a little sick as he realised what danger had pressed close upon the ladies all night—danger which might have involved Sir Robert and himself as well had the veil of prudence been a little less in evidence where the raiders were concerned. The thought did not make him any gentler to Zaman Khan when the old man asked calmly when the household would return, as he and the servants must put up some sort of shelter for them first.

"Return here?" he cried. "That they will cer-

tainly not do. My uncle has assigned them quarters in the Elchi Khana, where they will dwell as his guests."

"But pardon, sahib! My master entrusted them to my care, and bade me guard them at this place."

"That can't be helped. The Elchi Beg will not permit them to depart. They are not safe here."

"I am your suppliant, sahib. Your honour will show me guiltless when Istākis Beg demands why his orders issued to his servant have not been obeyed?"

"Absolutely. If you mean to remain, you can, though I think you would be safer in Khamish. But the ladies will stay where they are, and we will take them any of their things that can be found."

Harmar had been engaged in the task of searching the ruins while Arthur talked to Zaman Khan, but with slight success. The destruction had been so thorough that it seemed hopeless to find anything uninjured. At last in desperation the two young men commandeered a couple of sacks from the *daulatkhana* and swept into them every fragment that appeared to have any relation to feminine use or adornment, carrying them back upon their saddles as though they were plunderers themselves when they left Zaman Khan to his barren sovereignty. Sir Robert had strictly forbidden them to embark upon any pursuit of the raiders with their slender force, so that the mysteries of the attack and retreat were necessarily left unsolved. They returned to Khamish to find both the Envoy and the Dadkhwah hungry for news, which they could do little to supply, and to realise that matters must now take the usual unsatisfactory course of an appeal to the nearest Amban with respect to the outrage committed by tribesmen alleging themselves to be under his orders—for which he would promptly disclaim all responsibility.

On the afternoon of Arthur's return Sir Robert took him to tea with Miss Travis and Noel on their verandah. They had kept strictly to their own society so far, both

because they were really ill after the fright and exertion, and because of the great clothes difficulty—and even the invitation to tea was only extracted by a kind of royal intimation from Sir Robert that he wished to be asked. Noel was still in her riding-habit when the guests arrived, but poor Miss Travis was hopelessly ill at ease in a nondescript white garment which was evidently a Pahari woman's gown, with a curious construction of strips of white stuff on her head to make up for the absence of a cap. Noel was inclined to be prickly, as Arthur found when he ventured to ask whether the two sacks of salvage were likely to be any good.

"Awfully useful," she replied promptly. "There's half a black skirt of Travy's, and half a white one of mine. We can sew them together and make one skirt that will do beautifully, can't we?"

"Don't ask me!" he entreated. "You must know best."

"Why couldn't you have brought something—anything—that would have been the least bit of use?" she demanded, forsaking irony as inadequate to the occasion.

"We brought *everything*," replied Arthur proudly.

"I suppose you never even thought of looking for any hairpins on the floor or anywhere?"

"Never once. I'm awfully sorry. Now Grandier would have known all about that sort of thing. Do you think we should have found any?"

"I don't see what the raiders could have wanted with them. And we are utterly lost without them." She turned her head so that he could see that her hair was gathered up and tied with a strip of silk. "We only had about two each left when we got here, and I had to let poor Travy have them all. Otherwise I don't think she would ever have faced any one again. Our old woman is going to try and get us some from a Sinite woman she knows, just long pins with artificial flowers at the end. Nice guys we shall look!"

"You couldn't do that anyhow—not nice guys, I mean—Oh, I say, I'm getting awfully mixed! You would look nice anyhow, but not guys—there! I've got it right. But don't you see what a gorgeous chance you have of dressing just as you like, without minding what the other girls say? It'll be all the same to us—at least, I mean, we shall think it's all right whatever you wear, and you can make pictures of yourselves all day long."

He spoke with such evident good faith that Noel found herself unable to turn and rend him as she felt he deserved. "You are too absurd!" she said. "We shall just have to wear those white things and stay indoors."

"Why, aren't they rather like what angels wear in pictures?"

"Oh, if your idea of an angel is a feather-bed with a string tied round its waist——!" Noel glanced aside at poor Miss Travis, to whose figure her garb was not flattering.

"Has a feather-bed got a waist?"

"Or has an angel?" she laughed in spite of herself. "Well, the only other thing we can get is a *choga* like a paint-rag."

"What's a paint-rag?"

"What you wipe your brushes on when you are painting—blotches of every colour under the sun. This *mushroo* stuff is just like that."

"Awfully picturesque, though, don't you think? Why, you do your hair in two plaits, and put on a Pahaï girl's cap, and you'll be the Maid of Athens, or somebody out of some book of that sort, on the spot."

"You are always talking about books!" said Noel, most unjustly. "I hate books. They only lead you wrong."

"Ah," said Sir Robert, catching the word books, "I was afraid you would not feel much regret at the destruction of your uncle's library, Miss Noel. Rather a prison to you lately, wasn't it?"



"A prison? It was a treadmill!" cried Noel. "I really can forgive the enemy for everything because they made a bonfire of the books!"

"I say, you know, Grandier will be awfully glad to hear this," said Arthur, with his friendly smile. "What spiffing times you and he will be able to have when he gets back! But look here"—he had caught the merest passing shadow on Noel's face—"why should you just sit and mope till he comes? Tell you what, I know my uncle is going to ask you to ride with him to morrow. Well, when he doesn't, you and I will go for a ride, shall we?—a regular tearer. Now aren't you glad you saved your habit?"

## CHAPTER XI.

## ARTHUR TRIES TO DO HIS DUTY.

IT was Arthur's nature to be a knight-errant—at least, Sir Robert said he supposed so when he found that his nephew had shouldered the responsibility of helping Miss Brown to keep up her spirits during her lover's absence, and Arthur had to remind him that she had been left in his charge by Grandier himself. He could not help feeling that it was a little inconsiderate of his uncle to arrange that Harmar or the Doctor acted as Noel's escort almost as often as he did, even though they had been confidentially informed of the engagement. What was still harder was that Noel herself did not appear to be particularly pleased with his company.

"Look here," she said suddenly during their first ride; "do you see that white house in front?"

"Yes, of course," said Arthur, straining his eyes into the distance. "What about it?"

"Well, until we reach it you may talk about Captain Grandier as much as you like. After we have passed it, if you mention his name I shall go home."

"But of course I won't talk about him now if you don't like it. I thought——"

"Oh, I wouldn't be so cruel. As if I didn't know that you lay awake all night thinking of nice things to say to me about him!"

"But I thought all girls liked——"

"I am not 'all girls'!" snapped Noel.

Arthur rode on in uncomfortable silence, cudgelling his brains to find out how he had offended. At last a sudden light broke upon him, and he turned to her in a burst of penitence. "Oh, I say, I do beg your pardon most awfully. I ought to have known—that sort of thing is too sacred—a man has no business to meddle—that's it, isn't it? I am such a clumsy brute, always putting my foot in it, but really I only wanted to make things pleasant for you. It only shows—I told you I knew nothing about girls. Now if only——"

"—Grandier was here, he would have had the sense to hold his tongue?" supplied Noel, as he stopped guiltily.

"Of course he would. But it wouldn't have been necessary for him to talk about himself, would it?"

"I suppose not. But he would probably have done it."

"When you talk in that sort of voice, I never can make out whether you mean it or not. He would say the right sort of thing, anyhow, instead of making a mull of it as I do. He would be awfully mad if he knew I had managed to make you unhappy——"

"Why not say cross at once?"

"You do snap a fellow up so! You know perfectly well that I should never say a thing like that about a lady—especially about you, when Grandier asked me to look after you for him, and see that you weren't dull. I thought it was awfully good of him——"

"So do I—*detestably* good! So whenever you try to be kind to me—oh, don't deny it; you know you have tried hard—whenever you talk to me, or come to tea, or take me for a ride, it's never any pleasure to you, but simply to oblige him?"

"This isn't any pleasure," said Arthur pathetically. "I never knew anybody like you. You badger a fellow till he don't know whether he's standing on his head or his heels."

"That was just what I was afraid of. I knew it

could be no pleasure to you to ride with me. So please take one orderly and go on by yourself, and the other shall chaperon me home."

"Oh, now really, Miss Brown!" the worm had turned at last; "I don't think I deserve that. You must know I would do anything for you—for Grandier's sake——" Either from nervousness or sheer exasperation, Noel gave her horse a cut which sent him off at a gallop. She pulled him up quite easily after a time which she may have thought sufficient to afford an opportunity of changing the subject, but Arthur was in the habit of sticking to things like a Briton. He ranged up alongside, and continued as if there had been no interruption. "Even if I really disliked riding with you—it's all very well pretending I said so, but you know I didn't—you can't imagine I would let you ride home with only a sowar to take care of you. But when you know how awfully glad I am to do anything in the world for you"—he repressed the inevitable condition with a valiant effort—"and that it's only because I am such an idiot that I never hit upon the right thing, or always do it in the wrong way, I do think it would be kind if you told me what you wanted done instead of jumping upon me. Give you my word I'll do it in double quick time."

"You couldn't," said Noel, with finality.

"Couldn't do it? Try me."

"No, you couldn't. What I want done to me is making over again, with all the horrid parts left out."

Wide-eyed astonishment greeted her words, then Arthur ventured a laugh. "Oh, I see!" he said mendaciously. "Awfully good joke—eh?"

"It strikes you as a joke, does it?"

"Well, of course I suppose we should all be better for that sort of thing, shouldn't we? But not you."

"When you said that about a joke, I could have hit you across the face," said Noel composedly, fingering her whip.

"Please don't. Awfully bad moral effect on the

sowars, don't you know? Besides, it isn't deserved, really. I may be a bit thick-headed, but as I said, tell me what you want done, and I'll do it. You are too awfully clever for me, you know—I feel as if I had been beaten all over—and it's not kind of you to want things and not give me the chance of doing them. How am I to face—I must say it—Grandier when he comes back if you don't?"

"You make me horribly ashamed of myself," said Noel, in a low voice. "I do know you want to be kind—there!—and if I wanted anything done I would sooner ask you than any one else in the world. Yes, than *any one*, because I know you would do it if it was possible. And it's not your fault that you don't think me good enough for Captain Grandier—it's mine. I daresay I'm not."

"Not think you good enough for Grandier?" he repeated, hardly able to believe his ears. "As if I should ever——! Why, I should be ashamed——"

"Oh, I daresay you have never said it to yourself in so many words," responded Noel shrewdly, "but it's there. It's as if you were always saying to me, 'Look here, my good girl, I don't believe you realise one bit how frightfully lucky you are that such a paragon as Lionel Grandier is kind enough to look at you. I want to see you acknowledge it properly.' And it's not a bit of good, you know."

"I should think not!" said Arthur, awestruck.

"Because, you see, what one would really like to hear is some one saying that Captain Grandier is a lucky man."

"Every man is lucky who gets a girl to care for him," said Arthur simply, and wondered why she shivered. "It's just because it's so obvious that one wouldn't dream of saying it. But of course some girls are lucky too. And when any one is so particularly lucky as to have got Grandier—why, I suppose one feels one can't help telling her so. But I see I oughtn't to have done it. It was an insult to you—looked as if I thought you couldn't appreciate him

without my pointing it out, or as if you didn't appreciate him, which was worse."

"Then you are really quite satisfied that I appreciate him as he ought to be appreciated?"

"Of course. You couldn't *not* do it."

"Oh, you are incorrigible!" said Noel sharply. Then she laughed. "I can't help knowing that it's because his merits are so transcendent—not because I have insight to discern them. Well, let us leave it at that. You admit that I do appreciate him—that's enough, isn't it? And listen! when he comes back I'll tell him that all my appreciation is due to your painstaking efforts, and that no man ever had such a friend, if—if, mind!—you will promise faithfully not to mention his name more than twenty times each time I see you! Now I'll race you to the gate."

If ever a man was tumbled up and down in his mind, to use Bunyan's phrase, it was Arthur after that ride. Noel was so terribly disturbing to all his old-fashioned preconceived notions of a young girl in love. Tactfully he sought to discover the opinions of the other men on the matter. The Doctor said Miss Brown was a jolly little girl, but he should have thought Grandier would have wanted a bit more style in a wife. Harmar said he was afraid there wasn't much chance of their being happy together, which sounded so corroborative of Arthur's uneasiness that he pressed him to say what he meant. In strict confidence Harmar admitted that when he looked at people with his eyes half shut, he always saw them surrounded by a sort of coloured shadow, and the colours of Grandier's shadow and Miss Brown's clashed horribly. That, of course, was pure nonsense, and Arthur told him so with indignation, and sought no further. At last he was able to silence his misgivings by reminding himself of the terrible disadvantages of Noel's education. How could a girl brought up by old Brown have any conception of the way a decent man might be expected to behave? Greatly daring, he prepared to set this view before

## 146 England hath Need of Thee

Noel herself the next time he rode with her, purely in the hope of smoothing Grandier's path for him.

"You know," he said, not without trepidation, "you mustn't judge everybody by your uncle."

Noel looked astonished, as well she might, since the remark had not been led up to in any way. "I shouldn't think of it," she observed demurely.

"You see, he—er—has never knocked about much among other men, has he?"

"Oh, that's how you put it? I should say no woman had taken him in hand in time. Travy might have done it, but she came on the scene too late."

"But I thought he was very fond of his mother?"

"Very likely, but his mother was a sort of Mrs Micawber, as far as I can make out. She stuck to her husband when he was disgraced, and followed him into the native state, and lived there in a kind of *pardah*, but she couldn't prevent his drinking himself to death, or doing any other of the shocking things he chose to do. He respected her highly—as he ought—and she hadn't the slightest influence over him."

"Can we respect any one highly without their having the slightest influence on us?"

"Easily. Uncle respects Travy most awfully, but he doesn't care a pin for what she says. It was just like that with his mother. He keeps up the habit of having service on Sunday, and reading Sunday books, because he learned it from her, but he nearly broke her heart by marrying a native, in spite of everything she could say or do. My father was quite different"—her voice softened—"but then she sent him away to school when he was quite young—pinched herself frightfully to do it—and got some old friends to find him a post afterwards. Then in the Mutiny he volunteered, and got on splendidly, while poor dear Uncle was getting cursed by every general he came near for blundering in with his Volunteer Horse where he wasn't wanted."

"Do you remember your parents at all?" asked Arthur.

"Not my mother. She died when I was a tiny baby. My father had taken us to Habshiabad, where his mother was still living, though her husband had died long before, and cholera broke out. Mamma died before they had been there a week, and he hurried me away lest he should lose us both. Then he heard that his mother was dead too, so we had only each other left. He found a home for me with some awfully kind people in the Doon, and used to spend all his leave there. When they went home, I was sent to school in the Hills, and I loved that too. I was everybody's baby, and the girls were frightfully nice to me. Then Papa was killed in the Chikki Khel Expedition, and then Uncle turned up at the school and carried me off. You can think how terrified I was when a sort of Robinson Crusoe with long whiskers and a green and blue plaid suit came and demanded me, and insisted on taking me away, though the Principal was so sorry for me that she offered to keep me for nothing. But he wouldn't hear of it, and it looked as though he shook off the dust of the school from his boots as we left it. He told me it was an abode of vanity and would have dragged me down to destruction, which made me hate him worse than I did already. When I got to his place, the old ayah told me about my cousin Leonora, and I began to understand."

"Was your aunt alive then?"

"My uncle had lost his wife some years before"—the correction was significant. "Though she was a Christian, she had been brought up quite in Hindu style, and simply grovelled before him. No hope for his character there, you see. But Leonora must have been more like him, and he sent her to some horrid cheap school—not knowing any better—because she wouldn't lick his boots. At school she found out for the first time what it meant to be a Eurasian, and I suppose she made up her mind not to sit down under it. She was very beautiful, and at some gymkhana to which the girls were taken she met the Maharajah



of Agpur. He sent her notes and presents and things, and when it was found out and she was expelled, sent his *vakil* to Uncle to propose for her. Uncle was frightfully angry, and they had dreadful scenes. I suppose she was desperate, thinking what her life would be, always shut up out in the district with him, and at any rate the Maharajah couldn't be much worse, so she ran away and married him. That was why Uncle took me away from school, and there I was, with only the old ayah to look after me. Uncle would have turned her out when Leonora ran away, but she had come with his wife from her old home, and defied him. I suppose she kept up some sort of communication with Leonora, for once, when we were down at the property near Agpur—not living there, for that was the place Leonora had run away from and Uncle was letting the house go absolutely to ruin, but just looking after things—Leonora came to call. Uncle was out, and you can't think how astonished I was to see the closed carriages and the guards and attendants—I was about ten then. But old Tulsī knew just what to do, and she hustled all the men-servants out of the way, and sheets were held up, and a whole train of women and children came in. It seems like a nightmare to think of it now. Leonora was very stout and untidy, and dressed in a kind of mixture of European and Indian clothes, and she chewed *pān* and was perpetually eating native sweets. She had two dreadful little boys, almost black, dressed up in satin suits and tinsel caps, and she seemed awfully proud of them, and told me they were Prince George and Prince Alfred. I tried to talk to her and entertain them, but I felt as if I must scream, and all the women pawed everything, and poked about, and talked horribly, and Uncle never came! I had sent out messenger after messenger to find him, but he did not come, and at last a messenger came from the Maharajah's instead. Actually Uncle had sent to tell him that some of his family appeared to have taken possession of

Uncle's house. He was ready to let it to him if he wished; but if not, he was not going back there till they were gone. So the Maharajah sent a frightfully angry message, and Leonora had to go. I think she was sorry, for she seemed really to want to see him and show him her little boys—not just her carriages and jewels. She took Tulsi with her—I suppose they had arranged she should if she was unsuccessful—and we had a great clean-up, and Uncle came home and made us pack up and go off that night. Oh dear! let us have a gallop. I want to get the taste out of my mouth.”

“And what happened afterwards?” asked Arthur, when they drew rein again.

“Why, we have never been near Agpur since, and I have never seen Leonora again or heard anything of her. I never talk about all this to any one, even to Travy, because it makes her so miserable that I can't tell her whether the boys are being brought up as Christians, and she is always trying to screw up her courage to point out to Uncle that it is his duty to make enquiries and see to it.”

“Then where did you go?”

“Straight to Albin, and then Uncle got Travy, because he said I was running wild and was a disgrace to him. I remember quite well the day she arrived, because she said how wrong it was of her to have been troubled about her future, for it was quite certain she would have to stay at Albin the rest of her life, as she could never face the journey again. Poor dear! she little knew.”

“At any rate you had somebody to look after you then,” laughed Arthur.

“As much as Uncle would let her. Twice a year the poor darling has been dragged through the mountains to keep an eye on me, and in the summer that was really all she could do. In the winter, of course, we did lessons. We never had any proper lesson-books—just had to hunt up what we could among Uncle's. He has a perfect mania for buying

books, you know, not to read—it doesn't signify what they're about—but just on the chance that he may care to look at them some day. I believe he has agents who have orders to buy up the dregs of all the old libraries in India—at least, I don't know how else he gets them. Once he must have bought up a magician's library—I mean the library of a man who studied magic. You never saw such a set of books! One of them told you how to raise the devil. It was rather horrible, as far as I had got, and then Travy came upon me and caught me, so I never knew how it ended. Oh, Travy was sublime! She burned the book on the spot, and didn't she give it to Uncle when he got back! I have never seen her really angry except that time; she went at him like a furious sheep, if you can imagine such a thing. He was really frightened, I do believe, and he burned all the magic books, because Travy swore that if he didn't she would expose him—I don't know who to—as unfit to have the charge of a child. After that, he has respected her, as I said, and we went on in the same way until—until that visit to Ranjitgarh "

"And whose idea was that?"

"Uncle's, of course. At least, I used to make up all sorts of wonderful things in my head, but I was quite certain they would never happen. And I got abominably discontented, and Travy lectured me on contentment and having resources in myself till I was sick of it. I never thought Uncle noticed anything, until he suddenly swept us down to Ranjitgarh, with no proper clothes and no money to buy any, and threw us into the midst of that ball. It was bad enough then, but it would have been worse if I had realised, as I do now, that he thought I had been on his hands long enough, and had made up his mind to get rid of me."

"Oh, I say—I don't think you ought—that's a nasty sort of thing——" stammered Arthur, horribly perturbed by this plainness of speech. "At any rate"—he brightened up—"all's well that ends well, isn't it?"

and things couldn't have turned out better however much he had tried."

"Oh no, of course not." Noel's expression was a little peculiar. "Only, if he had known it, he would have done much better to send me to the Soldiers' Daughters' Asylum than bring me up as he did."

"Now really," said Arthur, with strong distaste, "you don't know what you are talking about. A little delicate thing like you——"

"I am not delicate. I can ride and shoot and climb, which many girls would give anything to be able to do. That's just it. I know I'm horrid and not a bit like other girls, but it's not all my fault. Things are so unfair! Oh, wouldn't Travy scold me for saying that?" she laughed drearily.

"But why should it make you unhappy not to be like other girls?" Arthur was painstakingly desirous to get to the bottom of things. "It's not as if anybody else noticed it."

"Oh, you are perfectly hopeless! Why in the world do you imagine you are perpetually talking to me for my good every time you see me?" He tried to protest, but she swept on. "If only you would think for one moment, you would know it is because I am so queer that you can't help being afraid I shall lead poor Captain Grandier an awful life."

"I think," said Arthur, with a huge mental effort, "that if you are queer it's only that you have made yourself so by thinking about it. If you would just be like other people, and not think about it at all—why, I believe you would be—— Oh, I say, that sounds awful rot, doesn't it? and yet it seemed to be just what I meant."

"Quite possibly." Noel smiled involuntarily.

"Now look here. Take me for an example——"

"Oh, rather!" with embarrassing effusiveness. "I should like nothing better."

"I say, you really are too bad, you know! As if I should ever have meant to say such a beastly priggish thing! You know I didn't mean that."

## England nath Need of Thee

no, no," soothingly. "You never do say what you mean, do you? But do go on. I apologize. There now!"

Arthur was still huffed. "I don't like saying it now. But what I was going to say was: Look at me——" he glared at her to see whether she laughed, but she nodded with intense solemnity. "Now if I was always thinking about Grandier"—Noel repressed with a heroic effort the assurance, "You are!"—"how splendid he is, and all the things that he can do and I can't, and grouching because I could never be like him—why, I should be most frightfully miserable always, and it wouldn't do one bit of good. I can't be like Grandier, that's quite certain. But there are a lot of things people want done for them—things that I can do—waste of time for Grandier—just all right for me—bit of good somehow, you know——" the explanation tailed off ineffectively.

"I do know." There was real feeling in Noel's voice. "It's you who are splendid—always seeing what you can do to help people."

"Oh, if you are going to rag again!" Arthur was deeply offended. He drew off to an inconvenient distance slightly to the rear. "Sorry I said anything."

"Come back, and don't be ridiculous," said Noel authoritatively. "What right have you to imagine that people are making fun of you because just for once they say what they really think? Come quite close." She flicked him lightly on the shoulder with her whip.

"Horsefly?" he asked prosaically, trying to see himself.

"No, stupid! the accolade. You are everybody's knight—'a steady hand to hold, A steadfast heart to trust withal'—and I *am* going to take you for an example. I shall go home and make a cap for Travy. She asked me if I couldn't, out of those pieces of handkerchiefs you brought in the sacks, and I was horrid to the poor dear, and said it was more trouble than it was worth. But now——"

## Arthur tries to do his Duty 147

"What did the man do?"

"What man?"

"The man in the poetry—with the steady hand?"

"Oh, there isn't much more about him." Noel blushed a little. "I think he just stood by, to help when he was wanted. That's what you do, isn't it?"

"I should like to," said Arthur simply.

## CHAPTER XII.

## BROUGHT TO THE POINT.

It seemed curious to Arthur afterwards that during this time he thought so little of public affairs and the objects of the Mission. He helped Harmar train the newly raised Pahari soldiers, and did his share of office work, for Sir Robert was still busy investigating the resources of the Khanate and drawing up recommendations. But since the wave of rumour seemed to have subsided without any consequence more untoward than the agreeable one of bringing Miss Travis and Noel to the Elchi Khana, it did not occur to him to share the anxiety with which his uncle viewed the state of things. Sir Robert was becoming seriously perturbed by the lack of any response from the Government to his first despatch. Even if they were determined not to send him the surveying party he asked for, an answer of some kind might have been expected. Letters and papers from home showed that the condition of Ireland was absorbing every one's attention, and it could only be supposed that the Ministry had, or thought they had, no leisure to think of anything else. But the time was approaching when the advent of autumn would close the passes, and it ought to be possible for the Envoy to know whether he was to remain in Pahar for the winter, and on what footing. Grandier wrote that he and Colonel Brown had completed their exploration, and were returning, but the tone of his letter was not cheerful;

and it could only be supposed that Colonel Brown had in some way been mistaken as to the advantages of the route he claimed to have discovered.

This feeling of depression on Grandier's part was very naturally reflected in Noel's demeanour, so Arthur thought, when he rode with her after the arrival of the dāk, which was the first occasion on which he could escape from his uncle's severe regulation of his time.

"Seems as if he'd been gone for years, doesn't it?" he enquired sympathetically. "I expect he feels just the same—as if he was never going to get back. So no wonder he's in the dumps—with this difficulty, whatever it is, and all. But it'll be all right when he gets his dāk, and knows he's going to find you here."

"I think he has been very quick," said Noel. A pause, and then she added hurriedly, "I wonder what you would say if I told you it was just because he is coming back so soon that I am in the dumps, as you call it?"

"I should say you were trying to pull my leg."

"Exactly." Noel closed her mouth as though determined never to utter another word, but opened it again to say, "But it would be true, you know."

"True—what? Oh, humbug, fraud, rats!"

"It must be your fault, I think. Yes, I'm quite sure it is. When he went away I was properly meek and contented. I knew I ought to feel grateful to anybody who was willing to take me off Uncle's hands, since he was so anxious to get rid of me. But you have been so determined to rub it into me that I was the beggar-maid and Captain Grandier was King Cophetua——"

"Don't know who they were."

"Well, that he was an archangel stooping to a worm—do you see now?—that it has made me horribly nervous about meeting him again. You have praised him too much—made him out too magnificent altogether."

"Oh, you are off on that old tack again? But I know what it is. You're just trying to have me on,



## Two England hath Need of Thee

about Grandier. My people at home say they're perfectly sick of the sound of his name. You can't say that, because I should know it wasn't true, so you're trying to take it out of me another way."

"Isn't it wonderful how much you know?"

"Well, at any rate I'm a good deal older than you are——"

"And ought to know much more? Why, I am about twenty million years older than you."

"Ah, that accounts for it, then! Very old people do get a bit dodderly sometimes, don't they? But, bless you! I don't mind. You can say what you like to me."

"I wonder——" said Noel, almost in a whisper. She turned and looked at him. "Just because you can't understand in the least——"

"I defy Solomon to," said Arthur soothingly. "It's quite certain I can't, as you say. Well, consider me a post, or a pump, or anything deaf and stolid of that kind, and go ahead."

"I wonder if you have ever thought that some day you might meet some one who would be——well, *the* one."

He looked at her suspiciously. "I may have. But I don't know how you knew."

"Well, I was like that. I suppose other girls are too, and I wondered whether men were. What is yours like?"

"I don't know," gruffly. "Haven't thought about it. So long as it's *her* it doesn't signify what she's like."

"But I thought I knew the colour of his hair and eyes and everything. And when we went into that hall at Ranjitgarh I looked across the room and saw him!"

"Saw Grandier, you mean?"

"I didn't know that was his name, of course. I called him Lancelot to myself. And when he wrote L. G. on my programme, I thought even that had been right."

"And you and he got on like a house afire?"

"I was in a kind of dream. Afterwards I knew that I had been a little bit disappointed—not in his looks, but in him, in the way he talked. But I said to myself that it was my own fault—I had expected too much. Then the next morning Uncle carried us off straight back to Albin, and it seemed as if there was no hope of seeing him again and getting things put right. But—I suppose you can't possibly understand this—I thought about Lancelot more than ever. If you only had the faintest idea what Albin is like in the winter—absolutely cut off from everything and every one! Poor darling Travy can't possibly go out—she's too stiff with rheumatism—and she's never really warm till spring comes again. Her chilblains are something awful, but she's an angel about them, as she is about everything. The servants are all huddled up in their blankets, and as cross and miserable as they can be. Uncle doesn't mind any amount of cold, any more than he does heat, and he and I go out whenever it's possible. But there are ever so many days when you can't get out—fog or falling snow, or the paths so slippery that you can't set foot on them. Those are the awful times, when after the housekeeping is done you can only read or sew. Well, I used to sew and sew and think about Lancelot, pretend that he was coming, might come any moment. Of course it was silly—Travy guessed what I was at, and told me it was—but it was so thrillingly interesting! I knew it was nonsense all the time, but I used to pretend that he had traced me from Ranjitgarh, and forced his way through the mountains, and would suddenly appear. Wasn't I an idiot?" she asked the question as dispassionately as if she was not speaking of herself at all.

"Not a bit. It's just the sort of thing Grandier might be expected to do."

"Oh, you are as bad as Uncle! The worst of it, was that I couldn't keep my thoughts to myself. They were so real that I couldn't help seeing everything

## England hath Need of Thee

with Lancelot's eyes—ourselves and the house and everything. I worried Travy about my clothes—I knew by that time they were all wrong, of course—and about the arrangement of the furniture, and all the things we hadn't got. And Uncle heard me, and if you will believe it, he was delighted! He took it into his head—well, you can guess quite well what he took into his head, and it was no good whatever telling him that it was nothing of that sort at all, and he teased me about it all the rest of the winter. I suppose in time he might have forgotten and left me alone if it hadn't been for your all coming to Albin, but of course when he had once heard Captain Grandier's name there was no holding him."

"But I say, how frightfully romantic, and all that, your dreaming of Grandier all winter and his dreaming of you, when there was no reason why either of you should ever hope to meet again! Why"—with awe—"it's just like a book!"

"You don't understand a bit! I was not dreaming of him. I was dreaming about Lancelot."

"But Lancelot was him—I mean he was Lancelot—you said so. Of course I quite see that your uncle's putting his oar in made things awfully uncomfortable and unpleasant for you, and if it had been anybody but Grandier you might have felt a little awkward. But he can always say just the right thing—he knows all about women, you know."

Noel rode on in silence a moment. "Do you know," she said at last, "I think that must be what is the matter. He knows all about women—that is, he thinks he does—but he doesn't know anything about me."

"Joke?" enquired Arthur. "You're a woman, aren't you?"

"Yes, and that's how I know that he doesn't know anything really. He has made up something in his own mind which he thinks is a woman, and all women have got to fit into that mould. If they don't, they are unwomanly. Some women—a lot of women, I dare say—see at once what he has got in his mind,

## Brought to the Point

and pretend to fit into the mould. Then he is pleased because he thinks it shows what a good judge he is. But some don't fit in, and won't fit in, and that he has got to learn."

"And you are going to teach him?" with a chuckle. "What a treat for both of you!"

"Don't talk as if I wanted to teach him!" said Noel, with sudden fierceness. "He insists upon it, as you know."

"No, there you are unfair to him," said Arthur, with a lively recollection of the absent Grandier's complaints. "He don't want all this unpleasantness, this digging up of all sorts of motives and imaginations. He just wants to go on in the ordinary way engaged people do go on, and give you as nice a time as he possibly can, if only you'll be just ordinarily decent to him."

"You mean that I don't treat him properly?"

"I never said anything of the sort. But when I see a rare good fellow—and such a man as Grandier—my friend, too, not appreciated as he ought to be, it does make me angry, and I can't help it if you don't like it. The girl that gets Grandier ought to be jolly thankful."

"You have said that before—a good many times. Why don't you go on and say that he is to be pitied?"

"Because he wouldn't be, if you would only behave like other people. You could be an awfully jolly girl if you liked."

"Thanks so much!"

"It's no good trying to be sarcastic to me. I know you're clever and I'm not, but what fun a girl can find in leading a man a life when he's devoted to her and she to him I can't see. There was Grandier quite miserable before he went away at the way you treated him, and for no reason whatever."

"And I ought to be ashamed of myself? Oh, I am, I assure you! I wonder you will condescend to speak to me."

## **England hath Need of Thee**

"You needn't try to be nasty. A man can't see a really nice girl laying herself out to make trouble without being sorry and trying to put things right if he can. It's not only for Grandier's sake, you know. I should like you awfully if only you would be decent to him."

"He has a very good friend, at any rate," she said, in a low voice. "Please be my friend too, and I will try to behave better to him. But it is like building a house without a foundation—not on his side," quickly, "but on mine."

"I haven't the faintest notion what you mean by that, but if you only knew how much nicer it is to talk to you when you are like this. Why, you could turn Grandier round your little finger!"

"And I have no wish whatever to do it. Isn't it a pity? But don't be afraid, I shall try and remember what you have said, and when you see how gentle and meek I am—being turned round his little finger, in fact—you can think that he owes it all to you."

"Now you're having me on. I say, isn't it funny to think that each time I've ridden with you we've talked such a lot that we've hardly done any fences and ditches? And we meant to have regular steeple-chases, didn't we?"

"Never mind. You unselfishly left them for him when he comes back," said Nora forbearingly. "You can't think how I am looking forward to it, to show you how well I can behave!"

But when his eyes were turned away for a moment, her face was tragic. "Oh, if there was only anybody for Lionel to run away with!" she said to herself, and smiled at her own folly. "Did you say you had to be in early?" she asked of Arthur.

"We're in quite good time. I promised to give the interpreter an English lesson—he's awfully keen. Those Argoons are such precious scoundrels generally that one ought to encourage any of them who have yearnings after decency, don't you think? And he seems not at all a bad chap."

## Brought to the Point

"That's because you have found something to do for him. It isn't in you to think ill of any one you are helping, is it?" she laughed kindly. "Well, remember, I mean to give Rajah some sugar to-day, as it's the last time. Dear Rajah!" she leaned over and patted the neck of Arthur's pony; "his coat is just like lovely brown satin. He's the pride of your heart, isn't he?"

"Rather! and the light of my eyes. Even you would say he was worth it, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, he does to fill up the time with, I suppose," said Noel coldly, as they turned back towards the town, and once again he realised that in some incomprehensible way he had offended her.

Returning to the ladies' quarters after administering the sugar, she found Miss Travis writing a letter, the transparent paper of which showed, in those days of heavy postage, that its destination was "home." But Miss Travis had no near relations left, so that Noel was surprised.

"Why, Travy darling, who *are* you writing to?" she asked.

"Lady Charteris." Miss Travis flicked delicately with the end of her pen at one of Bumpus's hairs in the borrowed inkpot.

"But you don't know her!"

"No, but Sir Robert was kind enough to say he thought she would like a letter when I asked him. He is anxious about her, I am afraid. He told me he was sure she was feeling his absence more than she would confess, and her writing made him fear she was not at all well."

"But then surely it was for him to write to her!"

"He does, constantly; but we all know what men's letters are—leaving out all the really interesting things. I can tell her how Sir Robert looks, and what confidence all the people have in him, and how he enjoys the gallops on the plains—things that will reconcile her to his being away, and help her to realise his life here."

"The idea of your noticing all these things, Travy dear! I told you you were setting your cap at him when I made you that beauty out of three pieces of handkerchief! Aren't you afraid Lady Charteris may think so?"

"No, dear. Lady Charteris is not a vulgar-minded woman. Sir Robert's belief in her makes that quite certain. If I thought she was, and wanted to reassure her—why, I need only send her my photograph, need I?"

"You are always trying to make me out a beast!" cried Noel resentfully. "You know I never meant that."

"My dear, why should you? It was my own thought. There are advantages in being plain, as well as in all the other circumstances of our lives. Surely it is happier for me if I can see them?"

"I wish you had got married, Travy! I should have so loved to see your husband."

"But in that case we should hardly have been likely to meet, should we? Our paths would have lain very far apart."

"Then there was somebody!" Noel's amazement was hardly flattering. "Did he—die?"

"No. There was nothing romantic about it whatever. In fact, from your point of view, I could hardly say there was 'somebody' at all. But I did once have a proposal of marriage, if that will satisfy you."

"But it doesn't—a bit. Oh, Travy, tell me about it! You must, you know, on your own principles—so that what has happened to you may be a guide to me—or what good was it? Did it happen long ago?"

"Shortly before I came to Albin. I hope I am not breaking a confidence, but after all, he—— It was the Director of the Orphanage; his wife had died——"

"And he requested you to take her place? Yes, and why didn't you? You loved all those wretched orphans, I know."

Miss Travis took the pen out of the ink, examined it with care, tried it on a piece of paper, and put it—

back. "I am not sure you would understand if I told you, Noel. Sometimes I am not quite certain myself."

"Travy, you must! You don't know what it may mean to me. Why wouldn't you have him?"

"I have always had a very high ideal of married life, Noel. I felt that if you could not have the best, it was better to have nothing, for I have always noticed that the higher a man's ideal, the worse was the suffering in store for him if he declined from it. And it seemed to me that if I married for the sake of the orphans, or because I was happy at the Orphanage and didn't want to be uprooted, or for any reason except the only right one, I should be false to the light which had been given me. There! it all seems to you a very foolish and unnecessary fuss to make, and I don't wonder."

"Travy, what nonsense! I think it was most awfully romantic." For the moment Miss Travis was no longer a plain stout elderly lady in ridiculous clothes, but a witness—almost a martyr—to the true romance, and to be regarded with awe. "Well, you must finish. Were his feelings so dreadfully hurt that he couldn't bear you to stay in the same Orphanage?"

"My dear, I told you there was nothing romantic about it. People at home made some arrangement, and a lady came out to marry him—a most suitable person in every way. I'm sure they deserve to be very happy, and I have no doubt they are. Unfortunately—men are not always very wise in these matters, you know—he must have told her of his proposal to me, and things became—well, a little unpleasant. It was quite unnecessary, for I should never have breathed a word. But it was clear that we could not hope to remain on the old happy footing, so I thought it wiser and kinder to resign."

"And they turned you out to find fresh work, after you had given all those years of your life to them!"

"Now, Noel, I have told you I resigned. There



## England hath Need of Thee

was no turning out. Nor, mercifully, was there any hardship, or even much uncertainty. Your uncle was looking for some one to come to Albin, and he was guided to me."

"But Albin must have seemed something between a prison and a desert to you after Raiyati. And Uncle—and a horrid little pig of a girl who has done nothing but worry you ever since! Don't tell me you have been happy with us, Travy, for nothing would induce me to believe it."

"Well, my dear child, I don't want you to think me a liar. But won't you allow me to have been content?"

"Oh no, that's a horrid word! I'm not content; I don't want to be content! I am in a net, struggling to get free, and you want me to be content."

Miss Travis accepted the bewildering change from her own story to Noel's without comment. "I have never asked you to be content with anything you feel to be wrong," she said.

"But if it's the only way out—the only possible way of escape from Uncle, and Albin, and all that hideous, hateful life! How can you expect me to go back to it all, when you know it will be worse than ever after just this one little glimpse of pleasantness, and Uncle will be worse than ever because he will be so angry?"

"My dear, I can't decide for you. But it does seem to me that you are fighting with your conscience."

"Oh no, Travy, not my conscience—Mr Gerrard's conscience!" with a miserable laugh.

"Really, Noel!" Miss Travis was seriously perturbed. "Don't tell me that you have confided in a strange young man on such a subject as this!"

"You can guess how much I have confided when I tell you that he thinks I am 'standing with reluctant feet,' you know—afraid to grasp my happiness because it seems too great for me! We have talked at cross purposes until I could have shaken him. I have called him names several times."

"And you really think it is fair to Captain Grandier to discuss your feelings towards him with his friend?"

"Then why won't he let me discuss them with him? You know he won't; he puts me down—talks about 'no nice girl.' I can tell you, Travy, if anything could get me to marry him it would be his friend's view of him, for I don't see how Mr Gerrard could be so fond of him if there wasn't something really to be fond of. But Mr Gerrard looks up at Lionel, you see; and Lionel looks down on me. Oh, I quite see that it is a condescension for him to marry me, but I don't like it."

"Then you ought not to marry him."

"Why? because I see it, or because I don't like it?"

"Both. I see no possible chance of happiness for either of you. You have told me you believe he honestly cares for you, and unfortunately, he thinks you care for him——"

"Yes, but then he can't imagine that any girl could exist who would not care for him."

"But you have allowed him to think so."

"Travy, I have *not*! Uncle made him think so, and it was no good my telling him I didn't. What are you to do when a man won't believe you about a thing like that? I do admit that I have given up trying to convince him. Doesn't it seem to you that, if the thing signifies so little to him, it will only serve him right when it dawns upon him that what I said was true?"

"My dear child, it is rather a costly experiment to marry a man for the purpose of punishing him."

"I don't mind about punishing him. That merely follows as an unimportant consequence. But I do mind about getting away from Albin and Uncle, and being able to have things and do things like other girls. And if he insists on doing all this for me—why don't you see——?"

"I see the cost, Noel. If you are willing to pay for these things with your soul and your conscience——"

Noel shook her shoulders impatiently. "You are

## England hath Need of Thee

so dreadfully solemn about it. After all, it's *my* life and *my* future that's at stake."

"And his too. What right have you to gamble with them?"

"The right that he gave them me to do it with."

"He was misled by your uncle, as you said. If you honestly think he ought to be punished for it——"

"But what can I do? You know he won't listen to me."

"He must listen to you, if you put things strongly enough, and how can you expect him to understand if you don't? Why, my dear child, if you have talked to poor Mr Gerrard for a month without his even guessing what is wrong, is it any wonder that Captain Grandier is in the dark too? After all, he has really not seen you as much as Mr Gerrard has."

"I hate saying things out—hurting people's feelings," muttered Noel. "And then afterwards, you know what Uncle would be like—or rather, I suppose, neither of us can possibly imagine what he would be like—and Sir Robert and everybody calling me a jilt, and then going back to Albin and another awful winter——"

"Oh, you funny child, what a mixture of woes!" Miss Travis laughed involuntarily. "My dear Noel, can you imagine for one moment that all these could weigh in the least against the horror of knowing that you had married the wrong man?"

"The wrong man?" Noel's tone was sharp and suspicious.

"A man you did not love. He would still be the wrong man if there was no other man in the world. At least, that is how I feel about it. Fifty winters at Albin would be better than that."

"Travy, couldn't you speak to him for me?"

"It would not be fair to him, Noel. Besides, I can't help hoping that you may find things are better than you think. You haven't seen Captain Grandier for some time, and you hardly know him at all. Tell him the truth, and ask him to be patient with you. You

need not be afraid—no gentleman would even wish to keep a girl bound who asked to be released—but you may find that you can care for him after all. And then how different everything would be!”

“I’ll try,” said Noel doubtfully. “But I don’t believe it could ever come right in that way.”

## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE TRAITOR.

THE travellers were returning, and Arthur and Harmar had ridden out some miles from the city to meet them. It was only natural that Arthur should gravitate to his friend's side, and that Grandier should enquire of him more particularly about Noel.

"As fit as can be!" was the reassuring answer; "and looking forward tremendously to seeing you. I don't think we've talked of a single thing since you went away except you."

"Hope I shan't find you've made her sick of my very name," said Grandier, with misgivings.

"Oh, when she seemed to be getting tired of the subject, I just dried up, but then she always started it again herself, so that shows."

"And what—er—what sort of things did she say about me?"

"Why, she seemed to have some absurd notion that we all imagined she wasn't good enough for you. Of course that explains the queer way she used to go on to you. It was enough to make any one stuffy, wasn't it?"

"And you relieved her mind on the point—without letting me down too much, I hope?"

"Oh, I cracked you up all right, I promise you. The rest you'll have to do for yourself—say all the nice things to reassure her, I mean. Must make you feel awfully proud to have the chance of putting her

on good terms with herself—and you can do it better than most people. She has had a rotten time with old Brown, poor girl! and you'll have to make it up to her."

"What in the world has it got to do with you?"

Arthur looked unfeignedly astonished. "Why, of course, it's anybody's business to do what he can to help a girl who seems to be in trouble, even though the trouble's all nonsense, isn't it? And you asked me to look after her."

"Oh, all right. But that sort of thing needn't go on now I'm at home again, you understand?"

"Of course not. But I shouldn't like her to think I didn't ask her to ride because I didn't want to. You might as well mention it if you think of it."

"Just what I intend doing. It's the natural thing for her to ride with me, not with other people."

"I say, keep your hair on! How could she ride with you when you were a hundred miles away?"

"Of course she couldn't. Did I say she could? Can't you see the difference between my being here and being away?"

There was obvious irritation in Grandier's tone, and Arthur wondered and held his peace. Colonel Brown also was not in the best of tempers, and showed it when all the party met at tea on the ladies' verandah. Noel had put on the complete dress of a Pahari lady, which proved extremely becoming, with the white veil falling on either side of the high round embroidered cap. She had urged Miss Travis to do the same, but Miss Travis was shy of the head-dress and veil, since Sir Robert had remarked that they made her look "very stately—positively matriarchal," and preferred the cap Noel had manufactured for her. This was just as well, for Colonel Brown conceived the most violent objection to the Pahari dress, on the ground that it was aping the natives, quite regardless of the fact that no other was available.

"There are no Europe shops here," said Miss Travis mildly.

"But there are stuffs and needles and thread, ma'am."

"You want more than that to make a dress, uncle," put in Noel. "Buttons and trimmings and hooks and eyes and bones, and all sorts of things."

"Do without 'em!" snapped Colonel Brown.

"But that's just what we are doing, uncle."

"And the result is native dress—eh? Miss Noel has got you there, Brown," said Sir Robert, laughing.

"Well, if any one had told me that two women would sit down content to go about in sacks when they had hands and nothing to do with 'em——!"

"Oh, uncle, when Travy saved her knitting!"

"Knitting!" with a snort.

"My ideal of womanhood would be for ever shattered if I saw Miss Travis without her knitting," said Sir Robert kindly. "Perhaps she is knitting herself a gown—eh?"

"In stripes of many colours?" was Grandier's irreverent suggestion.

"No," said Arthur; "I know—don't I, Miss Travis? All the summer you make comforters for the servants here, and all the winter for the servants at Albin. And to make a comforter you get all the brightest-coloured wools you can find, and cut them into short pieces and join them together again, and the more colours you can get into a comforter the better the servant will like it. If he's really pleased, you'll know it by his making a *pagri* of the comforter instead of wearing it round his neck."

"Lieutenant Gerrard on the natural history of comforters!" said Colonel Brown unpleasantly.

"Well, I ought to know," pursued Arthur, undaunted, "for I picked up all the odds and ends of wool I could find at Khush Urda, and brought them along. You said they were no good, didn't you, Harmar? but I thought better of Miss Travis than that, and you see, that wool has kept her in work for a month!"

"When we get back to Khush Urda, I'll keep you

both in better work than that, see if I don't!" said Colonel Brown to Miss Travis, with a very poor attempt at friendly joviality.

"But we can't go back. There's no house," she objected, not unnaturally.

"That remains to be seen. I am going out there at once, and if Zaman Khan has done his duty, there will be some sort of roof over our heads. Then I shall come back for you and Noel, or send for you."

"It rests entirely with the ladies whether they deprive us of the pleasure of their presence here," said Sir Robert. "They may think it hardly worth while to go back to Khush Urda when the summer is so nearly over," and Miss Travis and Noel threw him grateful glances.

"You needn't be afraid, my dear fellow," he said to Grandier when they were alone together afterwards. "I should not dream of letting the ladies go back, with things as they are, whether Brown is pleased or not. What a bear the man is—worse than ever! I suppose he resents your attitude to his precious new route?"

"He may resent it as much as he likes, sir, but the thing is perfectly hopeless. You remember you said to me that you could not believe he had stumbled by accident upon a pass which had never been discovered by any of the tribesmen who are always in the mountains? Well, the mystery is solved now. He has discovered a pass, but it's a purely temporary one."

"An ice-bridge, or something of that sort?"

"Not quite so temporary as that, but very nearly. Here it is, sir—I made a careful sketch from the highest point I could reach without proper Alpine appliances. You see there has been a big landslip here—a landslide, rather, for about half a mountain seems to have shifted—which has blocked the valley and dammed this river which formerly flowed down here"—he indicated the various points on the sketch. "So now, instead of an unbridgable and unfordable



river, you have a natural dam, confining what the people there call the new lake—Yangi Kul—and by means of the dam you can cross what was an impassable gap. If it was only permanent, it would be great. But this is what Brown never noticed or never thought of—the river is washing away the dam as hard as it can, and it must give way before long. Brown has used it for three seasons, he says, but I should say one summer more will finish it. These snow-floods scour a channel very quickly, as you know.”

“Every Frontier man does. Brown must know it himself. What is the old fool grousing about? He can’t have thought you wouldn’t notice the scour.”

“He thinks Government ought to take the matter up, sir—reinforce the dam, provide an outlet for the superfluous water, make a road along the top, and so on. Of course it could be done, but the cost would be enormous—as bad as the Akrah section of the Shalkot Railway—and we know there’s no likelihood of their finding the money.”

“No, indeed. Well, I was afraid it was too good to be true. A new trade route, miraculously revealed at the critical moment, might have stiffened them to develop Pahar, but when it comes to spending rupees on it!—No, that hope is gone, then. You heard no news at your end of the country?”

“There was the same state of unrest you seem to have had here—no one knowing what would happen, but all sorts of rumours going, mostly gloomy. If only the Government would hurry up!”

“At one time I should have taken matters into my own hands, and announced the annexation without waiting for them. Suppose I’m more law-abiding nowadays, or less ready to take responsibility. But I confess I should be glad to know what they are at. You can leave me this sketch and your notes, Grandier. It might stimulate ‘em a bit if I sent down a rough estimate of the cost of this affair and the probable return. There’s no denying that it would be an untold benefit both to Bala and Pahar, but then we are out for retrenchment,

not for remunerative expenditure. Now I won't keep you from pleasanter society any longer this evening."

Whether the society to which Sir Robert alluded was really more agreeable than his own may be doubted, for when Grandier joined Arthur in the comparatively cramped quarters they now shared he was in a distinctly injured frame of mind. His friend was the natural object on which to visit his indignation.

"I thought you said she was all right now?" he remarked resentfully. "Why, she's worse than ever! Polite conversation from opposite sides of the room is about her form to-night."

"Miss Noel?" asked Arthur in bewilderment.

"Oh yes, you thought I meant Miss Travis, didn't you?"

"But she—Miss Noel I mean, of course—said she was looking forward—— She said—— Oh, I say, this is frightfully rotten! What can it be?"

"Don't ask me. All I know is, I'm getting about fed up with it. What sort of thing is this to come back to, as I said to her, after being away from her for five weeks and thinking she would be glad to see me? It isn't as if I'd worried her, for she hasn't seen me enough to get tired of me."

"Shy; d'ye think?"

"What business has a girl to be shy of the man she's engaged to? No, there's something behind this. She said she had something to tell me—something that would make me very angry—and then I couldn't get her to say what it was. Said she would tell me to-morrow. So I said it was all right to-day, anyhow—and she pretended to faint!"

"Pretended to faint!"

"Yes, but, I soon showed her that it was no good. She's behind the times. Girls don't faint nowadays; they only pretend to. So she pulled herself together in double quick time, and sat shivering and cowering as if I was going to eat her. What are you to do with a girl like that?"

"Perhaps she really was faint."

"Nonsense! I tell you it isn't done. Well, you know, I have had about enough. I ask you, haven't I done all I could? She has nothing to complain of about me—I asked her, and she admitted she hadn't. I told you I was honestly gone on her before ever we came into these extraordinary regions, where everybody seems to be cracked. Perhaps I wasn't prepared to have her so absolutely thrown upon my hands, as I told you, but I don't think I have anything to blame myself about there. It's not as if I had hesitated or shilly-shallied; I took her and was thankful. And I have never had one blessed moment of ordinary—well, the sort of thing one expects when one is engaged—since! What does it all mean?"

Arthur had been thinking deeply. "You say she was thrown upon your hands—which is a disgusting way of putting it, but just the sort of thing old Brown would do. Has it struck you that she wasn't consulted at all?"

"Why, hang it all! she had been thinking of no one but me all winter. He said so."

"Yes, but she denied it. You told me so yourself."

"And I also told you that any woman would have said the same in the circumstances."

"Yes, but suppose she meant it. That would explain a lot of things."

"How long have you thought this?"

"Never till now. It just struck me. But it certainly does seem—— Some things she has said——"

"Yes, I suppose it wouldn't strike you until she had told it you in so many words. As things are, don't it strike you that I might have been the person honoured with the confidence?"

"I tell you she has not told me anything of the kind——" He stopped suddenly. Words of Noel's which had been dark and cryptic at the time returned to him, suddenly clear in this new light. "I swear to you that I had no idea of it whatever," he said hastily. "And at any rate, what's the harm?"

"What's the harm?" sneered Grandier.

"Yes, you know the worst now. It's better to know it, isn't it? All you have to do is to begin again."

"I like that! Begin again from the beginning?"

"The very beginning. Wipe it all out—it wasn't your fault, or hers—and start as if you had just met her again. Why, can't you see what it must have seemed to her—to be handed over without a pretence of consulting her? She must have felt that you were taking it all for granted. Oh, I know you weren't; it was old Brown's fault from beginning to end; but it has been worse for her than for you all along. Now you have it in your power to put it right."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't bring me in! It's her you've got to think of. You go to her to-morrow and say, 'You're perfectly free, absolutely. Don't trouble to say what you were going to say; I know all about it. But if you'll let me try, I think I can show you that I do really care, and perhaps in time you'll learn to care for me.'"

"Well, upon my word!"

"It's like a play or something, don't you see?—stooping to conquer. All this time you have been setting her against you without knowing it, but she can't help seeing it's the real thing if you care for her enough to do this—giving up all the advantage you have got, and throwing yourself on her mercy. You must see?"

"I see quite well that you are in love with her yourself."

"That's a lie!" cried Arthur, springing from his chair. But as he stood and met the sneer in Grandier's eyes, his indignant attitude relaxed. "It's true," he said thickly. "Heaven forgive me! But I never knew."

"Oh, don't cant!" said Grandier roughly. "Well, what does she say about it—eh?"

Arthur was leaning against the wall, and raised

his head slowly from his arm. "You can't think that of me?" he said. "You can't think that I would—try to cut you out—behind your back?"

"I never should have thought it of you. You were the last fellow—— But since you've done it, you may as well let me know how far it has gone."

"I swear to you that she knows nothing of it. How could she, when I didn't know it myself? I have never said a word to her that you might not have heard, never had a thought—— It was all for you."

"Oh, go on; you make me tired! All for me, indeed!"

"But it was. Why, think; could I have ever hoped to make her happy, when she might have had you? You may not believe me now, Grandier, but you will when you think it over quietly; I had a thousand times rather see her married to you than—marry her myself"—he faltered a little over the word—"just because you have so much more to give her than I could ever have."

"That's all very well!" Nevertheless, Grandier seemed impressed. He rose and took Arthur by the shoulder. "Will you swear to me that she knows nothing of this?"

"Swear by anything you like. And she never shall know."

"I should be sorry to believe you were such a skunk—you were always a decent chap. Well, if you can hold your tongue for the present—till you've got over it——"

"I shall never get over it. But I can hold my tongue."

"Oh, rats! You'll get over it in no time if you once make up your mind she is out of your reach. Besides, you've got to. If I am to work through the programme you kindly outlined just now"—Arthur shuddered involuntarily. "Just now"? when a gulf of uncounted years lay between that moment and this—"you must be just the same as you have always

been. There's to be no idea of your trying your luck, you understand?"

"I shouldn't dream of it. You trust me?"

"I do. Oh, I suppose I seem to you a bit poor-spirited, but I owe you something for opening my eyes to-night. I know what's wrong now. Before, I was fighting with shadows, but now I can set to work and make her care for me. And I rely on you to back me up."

"Talk about coals of fire!" protested Arthur, striving vainly to get back to their usual style of talk. "Old man, you have made me feel a perfect worm to-night, but you can trust me. If ever I can put in a word——"

"No!" commanded Grandier vigorously. "There has been enough of that. You slack off. It'll be easy enough now I'm back. Just keep your distance—not in any marked way, to set her thinking things, but just behave in an ordinary style, and let her alone. To-morrow I'll have it out with her, and I'm very much mistaken if I don't put things right."

"From my soul I hope you will. I should feel you could forgive me then."

"At present I see no reason why I shouldn't forgive you." Yet there was something of menace in Grandier's tone. "You always were a romantic sort of ass, and this is more your misfortune than your fault. You're gone on a girl you can't possibly marry—well, you've got to put her out of your mind. When you have done that, perhaps you'll be cured of wanting to have a finger in every woman's pie you come across."

"I? But I never have anything to say to women," protested Arthur, bewildered. Grandier laughed.

"Possibly not. But you do all you can for them, and they are quite ready to take the deed for the word. Be warned, and let 'em alone in future."

It was cheerless counsel, and it opened a cheerless prospect to Arthur. As he tossed about on his bed, he tried in vain to discover how he had gone astray.

He could honestly acquit himself of the smallest desire—or even thought—of supplanting his friend, of doing anything but help him whole-heartedly in his difficult wooing. He had wished to help Noel too, of course,—who would not, when she was so interesting and mystifying, apparently telling so much while revealing so little? There was something fine and delicate and elusive about her that seemed to keep you always on the brink of discoveries. He pulled himself up sharply, guiltily conscious that his next thought would have been a shadow of a suspicion that Grandier had missed this subtle something that was evident to him. That road was barred. Grandier loved her, and as she learned to love him his eyes would be opened to anything in her that was hidden from him at present, just as she would begin by degrees to appreciate him properly. And he—Arthur—would stand by and watch it taking place, and would rejoice in their happiness, though the pedestal his heart had erected for *the* Girl must remain for ever untenanted. Strange that Noel should be *the* Girl. Or perhaps she was not, perhaps he would never meet her. He wondered which it was, and decided that Noel might have mounted the pedestal had she been free to do so. Now, of course, she could not—any more than if she were married to Grandier already—and it was poor consolation to reflect that his dreams had never gone so far as to picture any return from the Impossible. She of his imagination. He had been content to worship—but it was cold work worshipping before an empty shrine. What had Grandier said—that he had better leave off trying to help people? That would indeed leave life empty: nay, it was impossible. Somehow or other, people needing help seemed to gravitate to his neighbourhood. He knew instinctively that if an unknown English lady turned up at Khamish tomorrow, five minutes after his introduction to her he would hear the familiar murmur, “Oh, Mr Gerrard, you are so kind. Will you be utterly sweet and do

this or that for me?"—"this or that" involving an indefinite expenditure of time and any amount of trouble, and more or less complete exclusion from any fun that was going. To-morrow! that was when Grandier was going to put things right with Noel, when they would for the first time enter abundantly their enchanted circle, and he would be shut out. He set his teeth. Well, let them! He had his own circle, the circle of those who needed help that he could give, and though it was not by any means enchanted, yet people were awfully grateful, and generally wanted you to do something more for them, so that there was really a lot of pleasure to be got out of it, and it was constantly expanding. He had dreamt of serving one, his lot was to serve all—that was the difference. And why should to-morrow—which was now to-day—look so bleak and forbidding, when really, except for those dreams, which had been very occasional and fleeting, and for that one moment of revelation when Grandier had stunned him with the disgraceful truth, he was going on just as he had always done? Thus he turned and tossed until what seemed to him the longest night in the world's history was over, and with the dawn he could persuade himself that he had argued it out that he was not so very miserable after all, and that if he was it was merely a fit punishment for his treachery to his friend.



## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE FIRST BLOW.

THE morrow was not spent by any means as Grandier had planned to spend it. Colonel Brown set off early for Khush Urda, still in a very bad temper, which made him refuse Sir Robert's offer to ride with him to the edge of the cultivated land. Almost before he was out of sight to the eastward, a dāk came in from the south, and among the letters and parcels was the long-expected official packet for the Envoy. Sir Robert opened it with eager anticipation, and almost doubted the evidence of his eyes as he read it. He was curtly informed that Her Majesty's Government had decided against any further extension of British influence in Pahar. With all speed he was to establish a stable government in the Khanate, and then withdraw, taking with him all British subjects. The coolness with which he was ordered to remove mountains was almost comical.

"Send the horses back to the stable, Sabir Akhund," he said sharply to the orderly who waited outside, on the alert for his commands, "and tell Gerrard Sahib to come to me now, and the Captain Sahib that I shall want him in a quarter of an hour."

Arthur, taking a hasty first glance at his mail before going out for a ride with Harmar, received the message and came quickly, little guessing the blow that was awaiting him. Sir Robert read him the brief missive without comment.

"This alters everything," he said. "We must get to work at once."

"But it means that Pahar will be wiped out as soon as our backs are turned, sir!" cried Arthur.

"The Government never did pretend any particular affection for Pahar," said Sir Robert calmly. "Now that public attention is engaged elsewhere, they feel free to kick it downstairs."

"But why send you to encourage the poor wretches, sir, if they never meant to do anything?"

"Presumably because they wished to appear to be doing something," Sir Robert spoke in his most measured tones. "Now that every one's thoughts are taken up with Ireland, the veil can be thrown aside. Still, it exists, and there is no doubt that it has been used."

"Then you see a hope of doing something, sir?"

"My dear Arthur, I am ordered to do a great deal. If you look at the letter again, you will see that before I withdraw I am to establish a stable government here, and to secure the safety of some hundreds of British Indians, scattered to the furthest limits of several thousand square miles of country. That is not to be done in a day."

"I see. There is a chance of delay?"

"There must inevitably be delay, if the orders are to be carried out. But was it intended that they should be? Does anything else strike you about this communication?"

"There is no reference to your report, sir?"

"None whatever. It has certainly not been read; perhaps not even looked at. Your father would say there never had been any intention of considering it at all—that it was a mere farce sending me here. But I have the right to assume that my recommendations have been duly weighed and taken into account. Now I pointed out that no stable government could be established here without help from India in men, arms, and money. My representation is not noticed, therefore it is my duty to send an ex-

## 176 England hath Need of Thee

press message of enquiry as to the kind of help that will be afforded."

"But do they intend to give any help, sir? If your report is being ignored intentionally——?"

"No doubt it is. But the delay will give us time to warn the Indians—or most of them—and get them in."

"You think no help will be sent, sir?"

"I think—I may be wrong—that the utmost help we can expect is that the force now at Raiyati is left there to cover our retreat."

"But you can't think that the Government mean to abandon you—to betray you, sir?" asked Arthur, bewildered almost as much by the calmness of his uncle's tone as by the thought suggested.

"Betrayal is an ugly word, my boy. I ought to have seen why I was selected. Your father warned me, but I suppose I was too glad to be in harness again to listen to him. They had a perfect right to choose their agent, and they had all England and India to select from. Then why choose a man whom they had vilified with all their might in the past, and who was desperately unpopular with every section of their supporters? Because they never meant the appointment to be more than a blind."

"They sent you here—to get rid of you?"

"We are not speaking of dishonest shipowners, sending an inconvenient witness to sea in a coffin-ship, remember. There was no particular reason why they should wish to get rid of me—my mere existence did them no harm. But if they wish to place a man in an impossible position, with orders impossible to execute, so that they may say, 'The whole responsibility was his. He had his orders, and if he chooses to disobey them, it is his own doing. We are not to blame,' it is surely better to choose a man whose loss no one will particularly regret?"

"But are you going to sit down under it, sir?"

"Not precisely. I presume—until I discover the contrary—that the Government were in earnest in

desiring to oppose the advance of Sinim to the Indian frontier. Therefore I am entitled to assume that they wish the measures necessary for keeping her off to be taken. But Pahar in its present state, under this Khan, will crumple up before the first organised Sinite force that crosses the border. Therefore we must have Ismail Beg, who has shaped well this last two months, acknowledged as heir, and recognised as such by the Indian Government. He will have the troops we have been training as the nucleus of an army, which with a little help he can soon increase to the needed numbers. But it is absolutely necessary that the help which is to be forthcoming should be known and guaranteed, that the Sinites may be frightened off, and the half-hearted people here may rally to him."

"But you said you thought the Government were ignoring your report purposely, sir. What if they won't send any help?"

"Then, my dear boy, the Sinite frontier will very speedily march with the Bala one, and the Government will lay the blame on Sir Robert Charteris, who had strict orders to keep Sinim at a distance. It will be quite unnecessary to mention that he was refused the backing needed for carrying out the orders."

"Hadn't we better get the ladies away, sir?"

"No, I thought of that at once, but the first sign of panic on our part would give the show away. As long as we go on as usual, the Sinites won't dare to move, not knowing what unsuspected forces we have behind us. Remember, we have to get in the wretched Indians from Aksang and the other places on the Sinite border—they have women and children, too. In a fortnight—or a month at longest—Brown would naturally be taking his niece and Miss Travis back to Albin for the winter. They will go by his western route, which is safe from the Sinites while we are here, and I hope we may be able to tack a good many of the Khamish Indians on to their caravan. What we want is to get the Indians away by degrees—anything like a general exodus would bring the

Sinites down at once—and to keep the route we came by as clear as possible in case all precautions fail and it comes to a precipitate retreat at last. It will be an awful business if we have to be relieved from Rajyati, and we must do everything we can to avoid the necessity."

"I hate the thought of having to slink away before the Sinites!" growled Arthur.

"So do I, and we will hope we shall not have to do it—nor anything worse. If the Government act fairly by us after this, we may all be at home again safe by Christmas, though with a very useful warning against letting ourselves be made catspaws of in future."

"And if they don't, sir?"

"Then we shall probably not be in a position either to give or to receive warnings," drily. "Is that Grandier outside? You might tell Harmar and the Doctor the state of affairs in confidence, and ask them if they have any letters ready that they would like to send—and the ladies too. And send round to tell Madhuji that I will see him at five--no use wasting time. Come in, Grandier, and we will get to work at once."

Mr Madhuji was the head of the Indian community in Khamish, and the proper channel for all official dealings with them. He was a fairly frequent visitor to the Elchi Khana, since he had established himself as purveyor of any Western luxuries the Mission found they could not do without. The consequent transactions were by no means without profit to himself, but he was possessed of an ingrained suspiciousness—to which he no doubt owed his business success—and always appeared to fear being lured into a trap when his presence was desired. Nevertheless, on this occasion as on others, he combated his fears heroically, and presented himself at the time appointed. The weather was still very hot, and his substantial form was suitably, if airily, draped in white muslin, with touches of vivid cherry-colour and gold. He was an old-fashioned Hindu, and the only European thing about him was his elastic-sided patent

leather boots — recalling a controversy which had recently raged hotly throughout India, and ended in the compromise that European footgear need not be removed before entering the presence of a superior, while native slippers must be. What the state of Mr Madhuji's conscience was as to the latest goods supplied by him can only be guessed, but Grandier averred afterwards that he detected distinct relief in the trader's small eyes when he realised that he had been summoned as the representative of his community, and not in his capacity of universal provider. This was made clear to him as soon as he entered the room by the fact that a chair was set for his use. He was very uncomfortable in a chair, and his appearance totally devoid either of dignity or picturesqueness, but it was a tribute to his importance that nothing would have induced him to forgo. When the proper salutations had been exchanged, and he was balancing himself awkwardly on the chair, he was satisfied, and could bend his mind to looking for pitfalls in the conversation.

"I have sent for you, *Lala-ji*, to make known to you the intentions of the Sarkar," said Sir Robert. "All that passes must be a secret between us."

"The plans of the Sarkar are formed in heaven," responded Mr Madhuji politely, but with evident suspicion. "Is it for this earth-born one to take them on his lips?"

"The Sarkar has decided not to remain in Pahar." Sir Robert saw no reason for beating about the bush.

"I told your honour that much a month and a half ago, but you swore to me that it was not so."

"I told you that no such decision had been made known to me. To-day the letters have come."

"Your honour graciously affords me the news in time to save my life. As to my few poor possessions, which I might have put in safety but for my reliance upon the word of your honour, they must go."

"Yet will not the Sarkar leave Pahar wholly destitute," pursued Sir Robert, viewing calmly the

stereotyped signs of grief and resignation which Mr Madhuji expressed in a kind of gesticulatory shorthand. "A settled government is to be established, able to defend the country against foreign enemies."

Mr Madhuji's grief vanished, but his suspicions returned in fuller force. "But that will not be leaving Pahar," he objected. "There must be a Resident Sahib, officer Sahibs to train the army, Sahibs at the head of the government departments, if the country is to stand."

"Of that I know nothing as yet. I have asked for instructions. Meanwhile it falls to you to see that the women and children and timid of your community are sent back to India, only those remaining in Pahar who are willing to face risks."

"But there will be no risks if Pahar is to be as Bala!" protested the visitor. "Why should we leave our poor little businesses, like tender shoots of rice just springing up, to be trodden under foot?"

"Those are the orders of the Sarkar."

The Hindu's suspicions increased tenfold. "Let the mouth of secrecy whisper into the ear of discretion, sahib," he entreated darkly. "What is the purpose of the Sarkar in this? Your honour knows that the Sinite traders are always working against us. Have they outbidden us for the favour of the great?"

"There is no intention whatever of favouring Sinite or any other traders. You are simply warned to remove your families from possible danger."

"Does your honour remove yourself from this possible danger? I ask with all respect."

"I am instructed to remain here until affairs are satisfactorily settled."

"Then, sahib, there is no danger, and we also remain."

"I am afraid you must take the necessary steps to bring in your people at Aksang and Kizil Rabat and the other places on the Sinite frontier at once. Border fighting is always possible, and you know as

well as I do that the Pahari army cannot protect them at such a distance until it has been reorganised."

"But the Sarkar will protect us, sahib!"

"I understand that the Sarkar, by sending you this warning, disclaims any responsibility. Those who remain hereafter do so at their own risk."

"But what kind of treatment is this that is meted out to us? Why are we to be made outlaws?"

"The Sarkar did not invite you to come to Pahar," said Sir Robert drily. "It has graciously protected you hitherto, but now it chooses to withdraw that protection, after due warning. Write to all your people in the frontier towns and tell them this. In the meantime, make confidential enquiries among those here, and let me know how many will desire to return to India. Then arrangements shall be made for guarding the caravans on the way."

"But, sahib, why is this?" demanded Mr Madhuji, much moved. "It is true we were not invited to Pahar, but the Sarkar followed us hither, and became our father and our mother, as at home. What have we done that it should suddenly forsake us?"

It was useless—even had it not been unwise—to attempt to make clear to the native mind that a change of government might naturally involve a change of policy, and Sir Robert contented himself with a platitude. "Such is the will of the Sarkar. Is it for you or me to question it?"

"Yet let it be made plain to the mind of this humble one. Your honour remains here to watch over the state as before, and to strengthen it with counsel and help. Yet we, who dwell under your shadow, are bidden to depart, and leave to our enemies the businesses we have built up. How is this?"

"It is not certain that I shall remain," Sir Robert warned him. "At present I stay because I have not received orders to leave, but they may come."

"Then the Sinites will make themselves masters of Pahar," was the instant reply. "In that case it



is easy to see why we—people should leave. But is that determined?"

"I know no more than I have told you. My orders are to establish a settled government before leaving. More detailed instructions will doubtless follow, but at present I can only advise you, as I have done already, to send your women and children back to India, and to accompany them yourselves unless you are prepared to take risks. There is leave to depart."

"Yet let the ear of authority listen but one moment to the voice of entreaty. What is the true meaning of all this? Does the Sarkar desire us to go or to stay?"

"To go, undoubtedly."

"Then the Sarkar is in league with the Sinites!" Mr Madhuji plumed himself mightily. He had surprised the discreditable truth out of Sir Robert's incautious admission.

"These things are neither true nor proper to be said. Beware that no such rumour is spread among your people. The Sarkar might have retired from Pahar without giving you any warning. Is this your gratitude for its forbearance? Go and do as you have been bidden—call in your people from the frontiers, and report to me the number of those who wish to return to India at once."

"Though really," said Sir Robert to Grandier, when Mr Madhuji had retired crestfallen, but still oozing suspicion at every pore, "one can't wonder at the poor chap's smelling a rat. The affair seems pretty fishy to me, and I can guess at the Government's state of nerves, which he can't. They must be in a frightful funk lest somebody should find out what they're at, and start another agitation, so their one idea is to be able to prove that they gave the right orders, whatever comes of it. If only their funk lasts long enough to oblige 'em to back up their orders with the help I have asked for, we shall save Pahar yet. If not——!" he shrugged his shoulders. "Then you can add to your letter that the necessary warning has

been conveyed to the Hindu community, Grandier, and afterwards I will go over it with you again. Shan't be able to release you in time for a ride this afternoon, I'm afraid. Is that return ready?" as Arthur came in with a paper in his hand. "Let me look through it." He went through the various calculations which showed the irreducible minimum of help in money, troops, and European advisers, that could enable Pahar to make head against Sinim, and initialled the paragraphs. "That will do for the present, then. I shan't want you till it's time to make up the bag."

Thus dismissed, Arthur went out, intending to look up Harimar or the Doctor, and suggest a game of the very rudimentary kind of polo which they were wont to practise in the necessarily restricted field provided by the garden of the Elchi Khana, but a lonely figure on the verandah of the ladies' quarters caught his eye, and he saw Noel in her riding-habit, looking rather disconsolate. It would have been rude and brutal to ignore her, and he walked across. His heart might be thumping ferociously, but he must learn to meet her as if nothing had happened.

"I say, are you done out of your ride for the second time to-day?" he asked. "What an awful shame!"

It seemed to him that she must detect something artificial in his voice of friendly interest, something forced in his smile, but she looked down at him unconcernedly. "Oh, it doesn't signify," she said. "The horses came round, or I wouldn't have changed my things. I shall just sit in the garden."

"Oh no," said Arthur quickly. "Look here, I'll get Sir Robert to let me take Grandier's work for a bit, and you'll have time for an hour's ride, anyhow. He'll be awfully pleased. He must be getting frightfully hipped, writing in there all day."

"No!" said Noel suddenly. He paused in turning, struck by the decision with which she spoke, as if she had come to a sudden resolution. "Don't call him. Let us go for a ride—as we did when he was away."

## 184 England hath Need of Thee

"You and I, do you mean? But Grandier would be horribly waxy. He wouldn't like it at all."

"Never mind. I should like it." There was no coquetry in her manner, merely that hint of strong resolution. Arthur, weakly conscious that he also would like it very much, woke to his position.

"So should I—awfully, but it wouldn't do. Grandier has warned all of us off against poaching on his preserves—not in any unpleasant way, you know, but he doesn't see why we should bag the honour and pleasure that belongs to him."

"I know; he told me too. It doesn't seem to have occurred to him to ask what I thought about it."

"He felt sure you'd be flattered, I suppose."

"Just like him! He always thinks he knows what other people will think—ought to think. But he doesn't. I am not flattered; I am disgusted."

"I say, you'll have to have it out with him, won't you? Regular pitched battle—I'd back you any day"—he talked on, uneasily conscious that Noel's face showed no sign of yielding. It seemed intolerable to have to argue with her against his own intense desire, and he tried to cut the Gordian knot by a bright suggestion. "Happy thought! come and let's teach you polo. I'll get the Doctor and Harmer in a sec."

"No, I want a ride outside the walls. It's been perfectly baking, cooped up all day in here."

"I would, really I would, but for that, you know. But when a man has asked you something particularly, you can't go and do the opposite straight off. He didn't want us to ride with you when he was here."

"I know. That's why I want you to come."

Arthur stood spellbound, for the pretence of teasing was gone. He could only look at her helplessly as she bent down towards him over the verandah-rail.

"Don't you see? Must I tell you everything in plain words? I want to make him break it off."

"He objects to your riding with us, and he has the



“I want to make him break it off.”



right to object." He felt he was speaking like a parrot, but what could he say?

"And I want to do something to which he objects, and to which he has the right to object. I want him to say, 'This can't go on; take your choice.' I want even Uncle to have to say that if I am so lost to all right feeling, he can't do anything but break it off. Then it'll be all right."

"But why not break it off yourself?"

"I have been trying to screw up my courage to—and I can't—and there's Uncle—and no opportunity—and it's so dreadful—and now I can make him do it, if you'll only help me. Oh, you will, won't you?"

"I can't," said Arthur hoarsely. She saw a horror in his eyes which she could not understand. "He's my friend. You forget."

"I'll tell him it's all my fault—that I made you do it. And you are my friend too, aren't you? And when I ask your help—when I want it so dreadfully—?"

"I can't. He's my friend."

"I did think I could count upon you!" The words struck him like a blow. Quivering with anger, she gave him one look, and turning her back upon him, went indoors.

## CHAPTER XV.

*A MODUS VIVENDI.*

"I SUPPOSE there's nothing more we can do now, sir, till you get an answer?" said Grandier to Sir Robert the next day, when the fateful message had been despatched, enclosed in a red bag in token of urgency, and addressed to the Resident in Bala, who was requested, as before, to telegraph the contents on, and forward the reply by swift messenger as soon as it was received.

"On the contrary, we can prepare for action, and incidentally see how the land lies," said Sir Robert briskly. "That involves necessarily another interview with the Khan, who is lying too low by far to please me. If he hasn't come back yet from his summer holiday, he ought to have. Of course they'll say he hasn't."

"I fancy he stays out at the summer-palace until the cold drives him in, sir. His tastes seem to run in the direction of rural life."

"Rural life with city varnish on - eh? Well, if he's out there still, we must go after him, that's all. You might call on the Dadkhwah this morning and make arrangements - or rather, open negotiations. I'll swear it's as difficult to see this twopenny-halfpenny Central Asian potentate as if he was a Rothschild."

The interview proved fully as difficult of attainment as Sir Robert had anticipated. The Dadkhwah thought it quite unnecessary, and likely to disturb the placidity with which events had lately been moving. Grandier had to pay a second visit to point out that it was quite

impossible to settle an affair so personal to the Khan as the succession to the throne without ascertaining his feelings on the subject from his own mouth. The Dadkhwah objected that even in this respect the Elchi Beg had power to arrange matters on his own initiative, as was shown by the fact that Ismail Beg had been confided to his care almost without conditions. Once more Grandier journeyed to the Minister's official residence to make it clear that since this had been done without Sir Robert's seeing the Khan, it was all the more necessary that he should meet him face to face now. Worn out, presumably, by the Envoy's persistence, the Dadkhwah yielded gracefully at last, and promised to bring about the interview, stipulating only that etiquette should be respected by a rigorous abstention from any mention of Ismail Beg's presence in the capital or his humble position in the Elchi's household.

The Khan was still at the summer-palace, it appeared, and thither the party from the Elchi Khana rode out, as they had done on that spring day soon after their arrival in Khamish, which seemed so long ago now. A change had passed over the city and the people—there was a sense of conscious weariness instead of vigorous growth, for autumn was at hand. The white-vened damsels who formed so large a part of the Khan's entourage were not riding races now; they sat under the withered trees and watched the Europeans languidly. The dry leaves stuck out sharply from the branches, ready to fall as soon as the slight breeze that rattled them should increase ever such a little, the flowers in the roof-gardens were faded and gone to seed. Over everything was the intense lassitude of the Central Asian summer—that melancholy which the Persian sage has enshrined in his quatrains. Arthur had never read Omar Khayyam, and would have regarded him with mingled exasperation and mystification if he had, but he was as conscious of the influence of the season as the poet could be. The premature and vigorous maturity—to



Western eyes—of flower and leaf and fruit in spring and early summer had given place to exhaustion, and before spring could return there must come that terrible time when tropical summer yields to polar winter. "The bloom is gone, and with the bloom go I"—Arthur felt that he had suddenly grown old. Something was missing, lost out of his life—only too well he knew what it was—and his winter would bring no spring in its train. He shook himself angrily to drive away the thoughts—he was getting as bad as Harmar. It was all the fault of this horribly sad-looking day and these doleful people. Things were all topsy-turvy here, where harvest was over months before autumn. No wonder the people were doleful, when they had half a year with nothing to do but grumble first at the heat and then at the cold.

Whether owing to the influence of the season, or resentment at being pressed for an interview, the Khan also seemed to be suffering from disillusionment. In the spring the prodigality of his liberal offers had been embarrassing, now he was evidently inclined to enquire into the use made of them. Sir Robert's sensations were not agreeable, since he was not in a position to fulfil the hopes he had been authorised to hold out on his arrival.

"What is this report I hear from my servant Niaz, that the Empress has changed her mind, and refuses to cast the skirt of her protection over my country?" demanded the ruler, who was even disagreeably wide-awake on this occasion.

"Permit me to correct your Highness. The dominions of the Empress are already so great that wisdom bids her refuse to add to them. Yet she looks with the eye of benevolence upon Pahar, and will furnish assistance to your Highness in strengthening the state."

"What assistance will be given?"

"I cannot at present say. I have asked for particulars, and will acquaint your Highness as soon as they arrive."

"Hitherto," said the Khan, in a distinctly unpleasant tone, "it is I who have given. What I have received your Excellency can best tell me. I gave you my signet and all the power of the state, opened my treasury to you, bade you deal with my army after the manner of Europe. What do I find? The people are complaining still---nay, more than ever---that the water-courses are filling up and the sand is overwhelming their cultivation. I have no army, for two regiments at most have been taken in hand, and when I desire them to display their acquirements before me, I am told that their training is not complete. And when I desire the Eski Hissar palace to be put in order for me against the winter, the merchants of carpets and brocades tell me they can supply me only for ready money, and when I send them to the treasury, I am told it is empty!"

He closed on a note of deep personal injury, which Sir Robert could not ignore, though he felt it needed considerable hardihood to demand the repair in three months of the waste of years. "The emptiness of the treasury no one can regret more than I do," he replied, "since it has prevented the carrying out of the reclamation schemes I had prepared. But it was empty when your Highness honoured me with the charge of it, and when I enquire why the taxes have not been paid in by the proper officials, I learn that they were seized on behalf of your Highness as soon as they were collected."

The Khan failed entirely to show any penitence. "For several years," he said patiently, as though endeavouring to explain things to a rather dense child, "the revenue has been insufficient to meet the expenses of the court. When the merchants refuse to supply more goods, it is necessary to pay them a part of their money. It is not for the king's honour that his servants should go ragged and foodless. Therefore the merchants must be satisfied, and to satisfy them the money must be obtained."

"In Europe there is a proverb signifying that the

spender should consider what is in his purse before he spends," said Sir Robert.

"But in that case I should spend nothing!" said the Khan, in the clear belief that, so preposterous a suggestion closed the discussion. Sir Robert leaned forward impressively.

"May I entreat your Highness's close attention? You will allow that the Mission did not come to Pahar without an invitation? Your Highness had expressed your desire for it?"

"The revenue was growing less and less," said the Khan frankly, "and the merchants were demanding their money and the people grumbling about the sand. You in India seem always to have plenty, and wherever the Indians settle in this land money seems to flow. I consulted the head of the Indians, I consulted Istākis Beg—both said that under the Empress's government there would be no more trouble about money. But the trouble has been as bad as ever."

"Your Highness must remember you are not under the Empress's government. But surely fear of the Sinites had a share in inducing you to ask for protection?"

"The people fear the Sinites; the king does not necessarily do so," was the meaning answer. "In their land also there is money in abundance for those in authority."

This was so remarkably like a threat that Sir Robert felt bound to investigate further. "If the Emperor of Sinim were to offer to take Pahar under his protection, your Highness would consider the offer?" he asked.

"It would cause much trouble with the people," replied the Khan languidly, "therefore I would not willingly choose that course. But the want of money is also a trouble, and if it goes on will be a worse one."

"The wise man chooses the lesser of two troubles," said Sir Robert didactically—"unless by choosing the greater he may avoid a greater still in the future."

The Khan pondered the remark, which seemed to have no particular effect in clearing the situation, then smiled rather fatuously, but spoke to the point. "Your Excellency assured me in the spring that the Empress would value Pahar as a means of keeping Sinim at a distance from her borders. If it is so, let her pay for it."

"Is your Highness making a definite proposal?"

"Nay, that is not for me to do. Let the Ministers of the Empress declare what she is willing to give, and the offer shall be considered."

"And compared with the Sinite bid," said Sir Robert to himself. "I hope soon to be able to inform your Highness," he added aloud, "of the precise amount of assistance Her Majesty's Government are prepared to provide, but it is my duty to warn you that there will be conditions attached to it, and also that it will very probably be much below your expectations."

"It must suffice for my needs," said the Khan, with dignity, though whether as a threat or in resignation it was difficult to say. "This talk of conditions I do not understand. Have I not already yielded everything to you?"

"Your Highness's personal expenditure will be limited, undoubtedly—at any rate until the country has regained some measure of prosperity."

"Is it a kingly deed for one monarch to stint another? Yet these are the decrees of fate, and must be endured. What other conditions will be imposed?"

"It will be necessary to settle the succession to the throne."

"That I have told your Excellency the respect due to religion will not permit me to do."

"Yet if Her Majesty's Government made the choice, your Highness would not find it impossible to accept it?"

"What would their choice be?" cunningly.

"There can be no doubt it would fall on Ismail Beg.

Aga Mohammed Beg's Sinite sympathies are against him."

"And the English sympathies of my son Ismail are in his favour? Or will you tell me you know nothing of his tastes?" The tone of triumph was disconcerting.

"So far as I have been able to observe the Beg, he gives every promise of a worthy future."

"And how has the Elchi Beg, dwelling in Khamish, contrived to observe the Beg who sojourns at Aksang?"

Sir Robert was in no mind to respect unduly the conventions of etiquette. He saw, and wondered at, the agonized countenance of the Dadkhwah at the lower end of the room, but he replied boldly, "The opportunity was granted me by your Highness's permission, and I have made use of it."

"The opportunity to observe my son Ismail?"

"As a member of my household, and in close association with myself."

"I have given no such permission." The Khan shot out the words triumphantly, evidently expecting to see Sir Robert overwhelmed with confusion. But it was indignation that greeted him as the Envoy rose to his feet.

"The permission was brought to me direct from your Highness. Without it I should have declined to move in the matter. It is open to the Khan to recall his decrees, but not to deny that he put them forth."

"Nay, be not hasty," said the Khan, somewhat alarmed. "Your Excellency is a wise man; consider, then. I learn that my son is secretly in Khamish, contrary to my commands, and is entertained in your house. What is likely to be said and thought in the city? Is it not that the Elchi Beg is treacherously encouraging the son in disobedience to his father?"

"Doubtless, since your Highness neglects to mention that the Beg's return was in accordance with your orders. What says the Dadkhwah Beg? Did he, or did he not, bring me your Highness's permission?"

"Speak, Niaz," said the Khan sharply. "Did you mislead the Elchi Beg with a feigned message from me?"

The unfortunate Dadkhwah came forward, wriggling, as it seemed, along the floor, in the excess of his self-effacement and apprehension. "May the effulgent lamp of the kingdom burn for a thousand years!" he murmured. "How can this worm utter that which is not meet to be uttered? Even the lamp of the kingdom is not always equally bright."

"Speak plainly. It is an order," snapped the Khan.

"Truly the command was given by Hasrat's own lips. Yet this humble one cannot but surmise that the mind of Hasrat may have been in the act of retiring within itself for deep contemplation at the time. The fault is mine, for having dared to force common matters upon the illustrious meditations."

The Khan looked distinctly foolish, and Sir Robert took instant advantage of his discomfiture. "I trust your Highness is now satisfied," he said. "If I have erred, it was in reliance upon your own word. The Mission will return to India forthwith, leaving Pahar and your Highness to the mercies of Sinim, whose bribes you think it no shame to weigh against the gracious kindness of the Empress."

"Stay!" entreated the Khan. "Will your Excellency destroy a whole nation because sickness has robbed the king of the full strength of his mind? There has never been any question of weighing the offers of Sinim against the favours of the Empress. They were refused with indignation as soon as made." Sir Robert accepted this with a grain of salt. "I am your suppliant. Do not visit upon me the faults of my malady."

"Then what is to be done about Ismail Beg?"

"Let him remain in your Excellency's care until the word comes which you are expecting. Then he shall see my face and be duly acknowledged. Truly I shall be thankful to have the matter settled, and to escape the contentions of these women. Aga

Mohammed's mother may carry her complaints to the Elchi Khana if she will. It will be no fault of mine that her son has been passed over."

"I fear I shall not treat the lady with the patience your Highness has shown," said Sir Robert, with the slightest possible hint of sarcasm in his voice, and waited for the formula of dismissal. But the Khan insisted on sending for the richest dress of honour in his possession, and investing him with it personally, continuing all the time his entreaties that the Mission would not punish him by withdrawing. His assumed willingness a quarter of an hour ago to see a Sinite occupation stood exposed as very palpable bluff, and no one who knew the history of the Sinite treatment of Pahar as a subject province could be surprised at this. Sir Robert promised at last that nothing but the direct orders of his Government should remove him from Khamish, and was permitted to withdraw.

"It has been a very close thing, though," he remarked to Grandier, as they rode back to the Elchi Khana, having bidden farewell to the Dadkhwah, whose still shaking hands and damp forehead were eloquent of the crisis through which he had passed. "The old man very nearly got us into a hole, whether he made up the message altogether, or jockeyed it out of the Khan in one of his drug fits. And the worst of it is that the pro-Sinite party may do the same at any time. The Khan can never safely deny anything he is alleged to have said, or he condemns himself as incapable of conducting public business. There's no dependence whatever to be placed on him. I wish we had Ismail Beg properly installed as heir!"

"He may think the position more honourable than safe, sir."

"The insurance companies would hardly compete for his patronage, certainly. But he'll take it on. There's plenty of good stuff in him, and we shall be able to get to work when he is at the head of affairs. The idea of their sniffing him out at the Elchi Khana, and using him as a handle against us! But a any

rate his being with us has probably saved his life. They were afraid to attack one of our troopers, so it has been the best thing, after all."

"Shall you want me this evening, sir?" Grandier broke in on his chief's musings.

"This evening? No, certainly not. I have been rather unmerciful lately, I'm afraid, but this business had to be settled. Miss Brown ain't turning rusty, I hope?"

"I'm afraid she is, just a little," laughed Grandier forbearingly. "Of course I have said nothing of all this, and very likely she thinks I've neglected her. I should like to try and make my peace."

"By all means. And if the lady is implacable, refer her to me. I can give you a certificate that ought to satisfy her. But I think she won't be hard on you."

"You have to take 'em the right way," said Grandier modestly, conscious that Sir Robert's glance was one of high approval. He could not help knowing that he was a very attractive object in his full-dress uniform, and he was not inclined to underate his other qualifications for dealing with the situation. No, he did not propose to call his chief to his aid—far from it! The position was a very delicate one, and the fewer people admitted into the secret of it the better. His spirits rose as he realised how delicate it was, since it presented a worthier problem to his powers. It would be too much to say that he had discovered a new attractiveness in Noel since he learned that Arthur had unwittingly fallen in love with her—that would be to phrase it far too coarsely—but the fact undoubtedly put him on his mettle. He did not formulate it to himself, but the truth was that it was almost entirely owing to Noel's unexpected disappearance from Ranjitgarh that her image had remained in his mind at all. Had she stayed on, he would have hung about her and paid her attentions until a fresh face caught his eye, when he would have faded gracefully from her ken with a skill born



of long practice. But she was removed with dramatic suddenness from his sight, and therefore lingered in his memory, and it had been a shock to realise that so unusual an honour seemed to have little or no effect on her. That the first woman to prove unresponsive to his fascinations should be this little dowdy girl from the Hills was only paralleled in absurdity by the fact that it should fall to that hopeless fool with women, Arthur Gerrard, to be the first to recognise the truth. Decidedly Captain Grandier owed it to himself to re-establish his reputation without delay.

As for Noel, she was very poorly armed for a contest with one whose power of commending himself to women's sympathies amounted almost to genius. Nothing in her life had ever surprised and wounded her so much as Arthur's refusal to help her in breaking off her engagement. She had thought she could count upon him for anything, and she felt as if he had struck her in the face. Because he had failed her, she felt extraordinarily friendless and forlorn; there was no one to whom to turn. Grandier found her sitting in the dried-up garden, beside the solitary fountain which was still running and maintaining a little oasis of flowers and greenness, and his practised eye noted instantly the quick impulse to fly, as quickly checked.

"Don't run away from me!" he said sadly, sitting down at her feet on the kerb of the fountain. "I know I deserve it, but you needn't be afraid of me. I shall go in a minute."

"It's more your garden than mine." Noel made this idiotic remark purely for the sake of saying something, and he lifted his hand with a look of pain.

"No, don't; please don't! You don't think— Don't you know that all I wanted was that *everything* I had should be yours? You won't have it—well, all right; only don't—"

"I don't know what you mean," broke in Noel, thrilling with incredulous hope. Was her task being

performed for her? "Has anything happened? You never talked like this before."

"I hadn't realised then. I was blind. Now I see, and I can only ask your forgiveness and go."

"But what have you seen?"

"That you don't care for me—never have cared for me. Ah, you can't deny it! I suppose I had just a faint hope till now that I might be wrong, but I see it's no good."

"But when—how did you find out?"

"It was just that my eyes were opened, I suppose. Of course I ought to have guessed—when you wanted me different from what I am, and that sort of thing. But how could I guess, when such a thing had never entered my mind?"

"Oh, but why didn't you *know*?" cried Noel, exasperated.

"It was my fault, of course. But at least I can put things right—to some extent—now. You are free—absolutely free. Good-bye. Forgive me if you can."

He rose and turned slowly away. He was taking a great risk, but experience taught him that it is impossible for the normal woman to deliver a blow without lingering in the neighbourhood to try and alleviate the smart. For a moment he wondered whether Noel was going to prove an abnormal woman, but before he had reached the farther side of the pool he heard her voice.

"Oh, I am so dreadfully sorry! You must think—I never dreamed—you cared so much."

"Why should you? You couldn't understand," he answered gently. "I was too old for you. Some day you will meet some one young like yourself, and then you will know." He realised perfectly that Noel was at the age when youth is a deadly sin in a girl's eyes, and her dearest ambition is to be taken for older than she is. He was not consciously insincere, but his artistic instinct urged him to present his case as completely as possible.

"That is absurd. You are not much older than

## England hath Need of Thee`

"I am," said Noel, glad to be legitimately angry about something.

"Not in years, perhaps. But in everything else——! But it is not your fault," he added kindly. "You will understand some day—what a thing like this means to a man, I mean. Especially when he thought it was all right—had a little gleam of happiness, and then it was snatched away."

"Oh dear, dear!" sighed Noel regretfully. "Why should you care so terribly—all about me?"

"If I tried to explain, I should only offend you. Please let me go. If even there was the faintest chance of my ever—but when I know you couldn't possibly care for me——"

"Oh, why can't I?" she cried. "Why am I such a wretch?"

"You mustn't blame yourself. The fault is entirely mine, and I shall tell your uncle so."

"Uncle!" she shivered and grew pale. "I believe—he'll kill me!"

"Because I made a mistake? Oh, nonsense! You must have the credit of breaking things off, of course—the lady always does, doesn't she?—but he shall know the rights of the case."

"It won't make any difference. All through another dreadful winter! Oh, why won't you help me?" she turned on him with something of petulance. "It really was your fault, you know, for I tried to make you understand. Can't you suggest something?"

"There's only one thing I can suggest, and it's pretty rough on me, but as you say, I deserve to pay." She tried to protest, but in vain. "If you wish it, I am ready to say nothing about this. You are free—free as air, but there is no need to publish it abroad. Take the winter—to think over it, we'll say—and in the spring I'll manage to get leave and come to Albin. Perhaps I can make myself more like what you would wish, perhaps when you think things over you may decide that a man who really loves you—But we won't anticipate that. At any rate, if it doesn't happen,

I'll devise some way of breaking it off then without exasperating your uncle against you. How's that?"

"You won't want to—behave as if we were engaged still?"

"Not in private, certainly. In public we must keep up appearances, I suppose, and we must write to each other."

"But you quite understand that I don't in the least—that I could never——"

"I understand that you don't, but not that you could never. Why shouldn't you? There's no other man, is there?"

"You know there isn't. You know I had never even spoken to a young man till I met you. How could there be——?" but she stopped suddenly, and something of the look of terror came into her eyes that she had seen in Arthur's the other day. To Grandier it was a danger-signal, and he made haste to clinch matters, though without asking himself precisely what he feared.

"Then I don't see that it could possibly harm anybody, and it would help you. I am the only person to suffer—regular Tantalus—eh?" he laughed drearily.

"But, oh dear! why should you suffer?"

"So long as it's for your sake, I don't mind. Shall we say done, then?"

"Oh yes, please. I don't know how to thank you! You don't mind if I tell Travy?"

"I should much prefer that you did." Possibly he anticipated the comment that sprang to Miss Travis's lips when she heard Noel's recital.

"I hope you realise, Noel, that you can never break with him after this?"

"But I am to be free—perfectly free. He said so."

"There is such a thing as a moral obligation," said Miss Travis drily.

"Oh, well, sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof!" cried Noel, with the flippancy born of deep relief.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## HOW THEY PARTED.

COLONEL BROWN was expected back from Khush Urda, and in anticipation of his arrival, Sir Robert went over to the ladies' quarters for a talk with Miss Travis. It was advisable to secure all possible assistance before attempting to steer Istākis Beg into any path not of his own choosing, and though she and Noel could hardly be expected to exert any direct influence over their autocrat, they might be guarded against interfering unconsciously with the plans made for him. Noel's presence was not exactly invited at the interview, but she was very fond of Sir Robert, and joined Miss Travis on the verandah as soon as she heard his voice, taking the reluctant Bumpus on her knee as she sat down.

"I hope you won't mind leaving for Albin as soon as we can get the caravan together," Sir Robert was saying to Miss Travis. "If you could tell Colonel Brown that you will be ready when he is, it would be a great help."

"But we are not going back to Albin this time, Sir Robert!" protested Noel, in dismay. "Uncle means us to stay at Khush Urda, I'm certain. That's why he was in such a hurry to rebuild the house."

"It would be quite impossible for you to winter there," said Sir Robert decisively. "No building run up in such a hurry could provide the necessary comforts for ladies in a climate like this, even if the place was safe, which it is not."

"But we should be safe with you here. When Uncle would always insist on taking us back to Bala for the winter before, it was because he said what would become of us if anything happened to him, with no white men in any direction for hundreds of miles?"

"And no doubt ungrateful youth thought that it would get on as well without him as with him?"

"Well, Travy and I don't quarrel with every native we meet, do we, Travy darling? We should be polite, but firm, and guard against being taken by surprise —"

"I fear you would soon find something more was needed. A heavy hand, or the reputation of one, is almost necessary in dealing with natives."

"But you will be here to take care of us. Why, we could even stay on where we are—"

"My dear No 1, you forget we have turned Captain Grandier and Mr Gerrard out of their quarters," said Miss Travis.

"Oh, they don't mind!" said Noel airily, tweaking the ear of the still ruffled Bumpus. "Nor do you, Sir Robert, I am sure—do you? It must be much more interesting for you to have us here—to have *somewhere* to go out to tea."

"I fear we must deprive ourselves of the pleasure. For one thing, it is not absolutely certain that we may remain, and for another, it is very likely we may come in for some fighting."

"And you want to send us off to Albin to be out of it? Oh, how cruel of you! To be shut up there, with nothing to do, and no one to see, and to know that all sorts of exciting things are happening, though we can hear nothing about them! Why, we could nurse the wounded for you. I should *love* to have you for a patient."

"That privilege again I must deny myself. It would be too dearly bought if it involved detaining you in a place of danger."

"But don't you see that we should infinitely prefer it to being shut up safe and dull at Albin?"

"I'm afraid we must consult your safety rather than your wishes."

"It's more than wishes," protested Noel; "it's *feelings*. Why are men so dreadfully careful of women's lives, when they don't mind a bit hurting their feelings, which is much worse?"

"Possibly because feelings can be mended, while lives can't very well be replaced," said Sir Robert drily.

"Noel, my dear, you are talking nonsense!" said Miss Travis.

"No, I'm not," said Noel. "I was talking as if Sir Robert was a reasonable man, which I always thought he was."

"My wife is good enough to consider me one," said Sir Robert.

"But you aren't, you know. You are just like all other men—pretending to argue with one at first, and then brushing argument aside and putting your foot down."

"Well, what is a poor man to do? He knows he would be hopelessly out-argued, of course, when it is a case of the very natural desire of a young lady to stay near a certain young gentleman. But since he knows the young gentleman has a foolish prejudice in favour of the young lady's remaining alive and well, though at a distance, he does violence to his innate politeness and packs the young lady off."

"I knew you wouldn't care a scrap what I said!" cried Noel, furiously blushing, but defiant.

"One must regretfully confess that the conversation ends where it began. You go back to Albin, but under protest, which saves your dignity—eh? We stay here, bereft of your society, but at ease as to your safety."

"But, Sir Robert, what is the danger you are expecting?" asked Miss Travis anxiously. "If Noel had considered for a moment, she would have done better to think of you than of herself."

"I shall get into trouble again, because Miss Noel will say that a danger great enough to make me send her away ought to be very threatening indeed. But, as a matter of fact, nothing at all may happen. On the other hand the Tartars who destroyed Khush Urda may carry their raids farther, and attack the city. Or the Sinites may even arrive in force, though that is hardly likely. So you see we may have either a very lively winter, or an absolutely quiet one. It depends almost entirely upon the help that arrives before the passes are closed. A few drill-instructors and a little money would do wonders. But of course there's always the chance that the help may be cut down till it's practically useless, or it may be despatched too late. That is one reason why I want to keep the eastern passes, by which we came, as clear of traffic as possible, so that our reinforcements may not be hindered on the way. That means that the Hindus who are returning to India must go in your caravan by Colonel Brown's route. You won't find them the pleasantest of travelling company, I'm afraid."

"What does that signify, if we can do any good by taking them with us? You mustn't judge Noel by the nonsense she talks, Sir Robert. We are both anxious to do anything we possibly can."

"Then you will be ready to start at any time?"

"Quite. After all"—with a deprecating laugh—"it's not as if we had very much to pack."

"I think I shall lose Bumpus," said Noel, uncurling that long-suffering animal from his comfortable position. She felt it pre-eminently necessary that Sir Robert should not imagine he had crushed her by weight of his authority. "Nothing would induce his mistress to start without him, would it, Travy?"

"I earnestly trust you won't," said Sir Robert, rising. "It would grieve me deeply to have to part poor Miss Travis from her pet, but she will have to leave Bumpus to our tender mercies if he doesn't turn up at the proper time."



"I didn't think you would have the heart!" sighed Noel, as he departed.

"Noel, my dear, how can you talk so foolishly?" asked Miss Travis anxiously, as soon as he was out of earshot. "Do you want Sir Robert to think you a perfect baby?"

"I don't care what he thinks. I don't care what anybody thinks," said Noel widely. "If you only knew how glad I should be to be killed, Travy, you wouldn't wonder that I want to stay here."

"It is all very well to say that when you are quite safe, Noel. It would be very different if death was really at hand."

"Now that's very nasty and disappointing of you, Travy. What you ought to say is that you're glad I don't mind what happens to me. People oughtn't to be too fond of their lives, you know. So that's the good out of *this* evil."

She tucked Bumpus under her arm—he hung down a good deal behind—and went into the garden, leaving poor Miss Travis looking perplexedly after her. It was very painful to see a girl behaving so badly, and the more so that her lover could not have behaved better. Having found out his mistake, he was applying himself with might and main to start afresh and get things right. Miss Travis still thought it would have been far better for Noel to break with him entirely, since she was so certain she did not care for him, but she was forced to confess that no one could have set himself more delicately or more resolutely than Grandier to the task of gaining over again the ground he thought had been won. But so far his efforts seemed rather to irritate Noel than placate her, which was distinctly unreasonable. Still, the girl's reluctance to leave Khamish promised well, and it was possible that during the long winter at Albin her heart might turn to the man who was facing so much discouragement to win her. It was a little hard for Miss Travis to be quite just to Grandier—he was too much of the society man to appeal to her—

but she was not so unfair as to doubt that he really loved Noel with the best love of which his nature was capable.

When Colonel Brown made his appearance, it was with the full intention of carrying off Miss Travis and Noel to Khush Urda at once. He and his servants had run up some sort of shelter to take the place of the burnt house, and if the weather was very cold, or danger threatened, there was the stone-built tower of the *daulatkhana* for warmth and protection. He admitted that there was no furniture, but there were divans and rugs and cushions, and he was willing to take out from Khamish some of the curious and unrestful native chairs if Miss Travis objected to sitting on the floor. It was not at first very clear what was his object in wishing to doom the unfortunate ladies to a winter of such extreme discomfort, but it appeared presently that it was to enable him to express his defiance of the raiders and of the Sinite power behind them. They had destroyed Istâkis Beg's property in his absence; well, Istâkis Beg thought so little of the menace that he was quite ready to expose the women of his household to the chance of its recurring!

It took several days to convince the stiff-necked old mountaineer that it was incumbent upon him to conduct the ladies back to safety in Bala instead of using them as an object-lesson for raiding Tartars. But that the work of organising the caravan was being actively carried on by Arthur and Harmar, Sir Robert would have lost patience long before his guest's objections to taking the course pointed out to him were removed. All hours of the day were exposed to incursions, when Colonel Brown would burst into the office, and advance fresh arguments to show why it was absolutely impossible for him to give up his plan of wintering in Pahar. He pooh-poohed the consideration of the ladies' safety, but was willing to compromise by allowing them to remain at the Elchi Khana while he himself took the risks of Khush Urda. It was as though he had discovered Pahar and had a kind of

## England hath Need of Thee

proprietary right in it, so determined was he to be at hand and superintend any measures Sir Robert might take. It was only by impressing upon him steadily the gravity of the situation, and the possibility that by remaining in touch with civilisation he might be able to stiffen the Government's purpose in dealing with the Khanate, that Sir Robert was able to induce him at last to consent to go. The Envoy might have sent one of his own officials in charge of the caravan, but to this there were two objections. None of them had traversed Colonel Brown's route in its entirety—even Grandier knew it only as far as Yangi Kul—and an experienced leader was especially necessary with a caravan largely composed, as this one was, of always timid and troublesome Hindus. Moreover, it was important, if the Mission was to make any real headway in reorganizing the Bala government during the winter, that the blistering influence of the Colonel's personality should be removed. On any kind of Oriental, even more than on his own countrymen, he seemed to act as an instantaneous irritant.

To organise the caravan was scarcely less difficult than to secure its leader. Sir Robert's authority and warnings were sufficient to induce the Indians to send their women and children back, but their suspicions of some ulterior design on his part were by no means allayed. They argued that he must know what the British Government intended to do, and it could only be a bad motive that made him conceal his knowledge. If he was staying in Pahar it would be perfectly safe for all the Indians to stay too; if he was not, all the Indians would depart with him, and it was their right to be informed at once. This unpleasant atmosphere was not the only trouble, for the practical difficulties of arranging for such a migration were great. The Hindus had dribbled in by twos and threes at various times, but they had to depart as a community. There was no system of post-roads and post-houses along the western route beyond the immediate neighbourhood of the capital, since it had not existed in the days of

the two great rulers to whom Pahar owed its internal development. Therefore it was necessary to make full provision of ponies both for riding and for carrying luggage—and the horse-dealers, since human nature is the same everywhere, put up their rates unconscionably for very sorry specimens—and also of the beehive-shaped *yurtes* of thick felt supported on a wooden framework, which served the wandering tribes as tents. No ordinary tents would have been any use on this journey, for autumn was coming on, and the nights would be cold even on the Pahar plateau, while in crossing the mountains the beginnings of wintry rigour were almost certain to be felt. At last, however, each family was successfully supplied with pack-animals, shelter for the night and warm clothing, and instructed as to its position in the caravan, and it was possible to fix the day for the start.

Sir Robert gave a dinner-party to his staff and his guests the night before the caravan left. His cook had addressed such respectful and urgent remonstrances to him through his boy that he realised it was the proper thing to speed the travellers with a *burra khana*. In earlier days he would not have needed reminding, and he told himself that he was growing old and thoughtless, or he would never have forgotten what even the servants considered was a compliment due to the ladies. However, being reminded, he sent out formal invitations—which were carried with great pride by Sabir Akhund, mounted and in full uniform, though he had only to go from one side of the courtyard to the other—and entered into the anxieties of the cook, who submitted tentative *menus*, through the medium of the bearer, at all hours of the day, according as Khamish delicacies or tinned goods appealed to his mind at the moment. The servants were allowed a free hand in decorating the rooms—the office being hastily transformed into a drawing-room for the occasion—and the result was Oriental—strikingly Oriental, owing to the incongruity of some of the decorative objects employed, such as a pale blue

## 438 England hath Need of Thee

pyjama-jacket filched from among Grandier's possessions—in its magnificence. Nothing was wanting, neither bonbons for the delectation of the ladies, nor stiff and inconveniently large bouquets for their personal adornment, and—entirely without Sir Robert's knowledge or consent—a native band was imported to discourse far from sweet music on the verandah during the meal. The host was touched when he discovered how his household had laboured to make everything complete, as they understood it. They knew what *burra khana*s ought to be in high official circles, and though the materials might be difficult to obtain, they meant to have things right. It could not occur to them that the result could only be to emphasize in Sir Robert's eyes the failure of his mission—through no fault of his. He had been sent out with certain orders, he had fulfilled them to the best of his ability and with every prospect of success, yet through bad faith at home he saw himself confronted with the alternatives of a makeshift achievement on the one hand, and of doing nothing at all on the other, thus leaving Pahar in worse case than if he had never entered it. But these reflections must not be permitted to cloud the ladies' last evening, and he thrust disagreeable thoughts into the background, and prepared to be cheerful with his guests.

But it was all no use. During dinner the magnificence of the dishes and the originality of the decorations furnished subjects sufficient to keep the ball of conversation rolling, but when Sir Robert proposed the health of the ladies, and hoped they might all meet again on a happier occasion than this one, while Noel looked stony, Miss Travis disgraced herself by weeping. She explained hurriedly that she always cried when she was particularly happy, whereupon Colonel Brown accused her jovially of being glad to get away from Khamish, which made her weep again. In the drawing-room afterwards things were even worse, in spite of gallant efforts. Grandier sang "Wrap me up in my old stable-jacket" and "Abdul the Bulbul Emir," to his banjo,

## How they Parted

the Doctor did conjuring tricks, Harmar gave an exhibition of thought-reading, and Arthur, who had no accomplishments—unless contributing a growling bass, not by request, in a chorus, can be considered one—applauded manfully the efforts of the rest, but the feeling of depression spread to all the company. And no wonder! the cynic may say; but Miss Travis and Noel were not cynics, and felt deeply grateful for the efforts made for their entertainment, yet neither of them could deny, when they returned to their own quarters afterwards, that they had rarely felt so miserable in their lives. But the servants, who had listened to the merry-making with intense, if scandalized admiration, felt, as they restored the office to its everyday aspect, that they had not lived in vain. Thanks to their labours, the barbarians of Khamish (deputations of whom had been admitted unostentatiously to view the table laid for dinner and to watch the festivities from a discreet distance, had seen for once in their lives how a *burra khana* was carried out in the household of a Burra Sahib.

"Have you got things settled all right with her, old man?" asked Arthur of Grandier, as they crossed the courtyard after seeing the guests home.

"As well as I could expect, I suppose," said Grandier, with some bitterness. "Begin again at the beginning—that's the only thing to do after a facer like that—and be thankful she gives me the chance."

"She must have cared all the time," said Arthur thoughtfully. "Didn't really know, I suppose—riled by your manner or something. But I'm awfully glad. You deserve it, too. It isn't every man would have taken it—everything, I mean—as you have done."

"Of course there's nothing settled," said Grandier hastily. "That was why I was a little afraid of what Sir Robert might say to-night, but he always knows when to stop. She's a bit of a jibber. But barring accidents, I think things ought to pan out all right."

## and England hath Need of Thee

"I'm awfully glad," repeated Arthur. "I know she'll be happy, and I'm sure you will."

It was over, then. Not that he had had any expectation—certainly not any hope—that it might be otherwise. No girl in her senses could turn her face from Grandier when he chose to play the suppliant, and Arthur honestly believed that Noel had chosen for her own happiness. What could he give her compared with what Grandier offered? They would be happy in one another, and he would be happy in their happiness.

He was still in this exalted mood when the caravan started the next day. The first sign of autumn had appeared in a slight north wind, which dimmed ever so little the blue of the sky and the white and red of the walls and the tiled roofs. The travellers welcomed it as promising greater coolness, but Sir Robert questioned the ladies anxiously as to whether they had plenty of warm clothes for crossing the mountains. He and Grandier were to ride out with them to the end of the first stage, where the main body of the caravan, which had been got out of the city betimes, was to await them. At the last moment sounds of woe arose from the servants. They were all horribly afraid of Bumpus, and in the course of inducting him into his travelling-basket he had slipped through their fingers, leaving forcible traces of his passage on the persons of his would-be captors.

"Miss Noel, I suspect you," said Sir Robert. "You have infused some magic into the soul of an ordinarily well-behaved animal, with the result which you threatened."

"Oh, if it's your doing, Noel, you had better go and look for the beast," said Colonel Brown ferociously. "Stay where you are, ma'am!" he charged Miss Travis, who was trying to dismount unaided. "We start in five minutes, cat or no cat, so there's no need to have to mount you again."

"I'll help look, Miss Travis," said Arthur quickly—Grandier was seeing to the loading of the pack-ponies.

"We'll have him back in a minute. He went straight over the roof—I saw him."

In fact, Bumpus, much ruffled by what he no'doubt regarded as his maltreatment by the servants, had made straight for his wonted verandah, but paused before descending upon it to perform a hasty toilet among the withered flowers and grasses of the roof. As he sat there, washing his face by the aid of a huge paw with all the delicate precision a self respecting cat can put into such an operation at moments intolerable to ordinary mortals, Noel ran into the courtyard, saw him, and in accents that would have melted a heart of a stone adjured him in the name of all he held dear to come down. Bumpus heard her with contemptuous indifference, and continued his washing with the other paw. Before Arthur, who was close behind, could anticipate her, Noel had scrambled up to the low verandah roof by the aid of one of the rough masonry pillars, and swooping upon her unsuspecting prey, snatched him from his coign of vantage, then turned and saw Arthur.

"I couldn't let poor Travy be deprived of him," she said, laughing and panting. "If I hand him down to you, will you be very careful not to let him go?"

Receiving Bumpus, with some difficulty, from her hands, Arthur stowed him under his arm, and held him there firmly, with small regard to his feelings. Then he looked up at Noel, who was realising that it was more difficult to leave the verandah roof than to reach it. "Put your foot in my hand, and I will guide it to a hold in the pillar," he said. "Then give me your hand, and I'll help you down."

Noel hesitated a moment, all the laughter gone from her face. Then she obeyed, as though reluctantly, and the touch of her small cold hand in his warm one sent a thrill through Arthur which he would remember till his dying day. He helped her carefully to the ground, then, moved by some instinct of self-defence, broke into words.

"I say, I'm awfully glad it's all right now about you



## England hath Need of Thee

and Grandier. I do feel most awfully honoured when I remember how you talked to me in those rides, and I only wish I had been clever enough to see where the trouble was before. You were awfully forbearing with me."

If he had dared to look up, he would have seen a glow in Noel's eyes that would have told him many things, but he was busy searching for white hairs on Bumpus's faultlessly black head, and could not glance away. As for Noel, she could speak readily enough when she did not care, but was tongue-tied when she did. Therefore they paced side by side in silence until the fugitive could be delivered to the servants and safely incarcerated in his hamper.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## BLOW UPON BLOW.

As soon as the westward-bound caravan had vanished in clouds of dust and sand, Sir Robert set his staff to work to collect pack-ponies and *yurtles* for the Hindus to be expected from Kizil Rabat, the nearer of the two towns on the Sinite border where there were Indian communities of appreciable size. This party must be despatched by the eastern passes, since Colonel Brown's caravan would have eaten up the slender resources of the barren country through which it passed too completely to make it possible to send another so soon. Arthur was to be in charge, with a couple of Tricker sowars as assistants, and his duty was to escort the caravan to the foot of the mountains, and then return to Khamish. The regular Caravan-bashis were quite capable of negotiating the passes, but Sir Robert doubted whether they would be able to cope with such a Sinite menace as had confronted himself. His preparations were completed just in time, and the refugees from Kizil Rabat, arriving as a mere disorganised throng, were promptly sorted out, equipped, and despatched on their further journey without much more than a day's delay. Now there were only the women and children from Aksang to expect—though of course circumstances might yet render advisable the removal of the men who remained in Khamish.

Arthur and his charges had been gone two days

when a *dakchi* came in—an emergency messenger this, carrying only the urgent red bag. He had passed the young Sahib and his caravan, he said, and things seemed to be going well with them. The *dakchi* with the ordinary mail had started at the same time as himself, but was unable to travel so fast over the passes; though he would be able to join the young Sahib in his return. Sir Robert commended the man for his speed, and gave orders for his entertainment, before retiring with the red bag to the office, to discover what his instructions were. He thought he had prepared himself beforehand for the worst the future might have in store, yet he could not at first believe his eyes when he read:—

“Leave Pahar at once.”

Not a word either of the fate of the Khanate, or of the Sinite menace! He examined the enclosure and its accompanying papers. The message came from the home Government through the Government of India—Mr Brancepath was the Secretary whose signature it bore—and it had been telegraphed to the Resident in Bala, with directions to forward it at once. Sir Robert turned it over in his fingers with something like stupefaction. No sign of explanation or regret, no apology to the Khan for a course of action which had first encouraged him to defy Sinim, and was now leaving him more defenceless than ever! What could be the reason of it—a European war, Scythian representations, simple funk? or had the whole thing been nothing more than that show of action worse than inaction, which pretends to do something and then runs away? As far as Pahar, and even the Hindu immigrants, were concerned, it would have been infinitely better to leave things as they were than to stir up hopes which there had never been any intention of fulfilling. But had there been no such intention? was such a thing possible “even to these fellows,” as Sir Robert bitterly described the Government of his country to himself? Surely they must at least have intended to do some-

thing? His past acquaintance with them supplied the answer. They had intended to do just as much as public opinion forced them to do, but that goad once withdrawn, they would joyfully do nothing. That lives would therefore be placed in jeopardy had no power to move them; it was merely an incident of the policy of scuttle.

It would be unreasonable to expect to find a sincere admirer of that policy in a man who had been working and fighting for the Empire since he left school, and the Government need not be credited with any such foolishness. They gave their order, and it was for Sir Robert Charteris to carry it out, no matter what his private opinions might be. But Sir Robert Charteris had never attained that ideal of passionless machine-like obedience which is the mark of the true bureaucrat. If he quitted Pahar at this moment, in accordance with the order he had received, he must leave the wretched Hindus of Aksang to the mercy of the Sinites, who hated them for economic as well as racial reasons. His former orders had been precise, to remove all British subjects, and there was nothing, so far as he could see, to make such a course less feasible than it had been hitherto. The Aksang Indians were due to arrive in three or four days, and must in any case have been hurried on to the passes before the winter should close them. Even if the tenor of this latest order should in some mysterious way, as before, become known to Sinite sympathizers, they could not dispute the passage of the mountains while the British force remained at Raiyati. Doubtless it had orders to return as soon as the Envoy had safely crossed, but it should serve to assure the safety of the other British subjects as well.

Sir Robert's resolution was taken. He would make all his preparations for departure, but would not leave until the refugees had arrived from Aksang, and would include them in his caravan, together with any of the Hindus still remaining in Khamish who wished to come. But though his decision to obey the order

might be made quickly enough, it was another thing to explain it to the Pahari authorities, to whom it was bound to seem utterly without reason. The Dadkhwah very naturally believed that Sir Robert had received secret instructions, and he persisted in declaring huffily that he was not in any way inquisitive; it was no business of his. When Sir Robert had at last convinced him that he himself had received no explanation whatever, the Minister displayed a lively curiosity. What could be the reason for the withdrawal of the Mission, since the Envoy, as he had often said, was satisfied with his reception and with the attention paid to his advice? It could not possibly be that the British Government intended to leave Pahar to its fate, since that would stultify all the measures Sir Robert had been authorised to take. No doubt he was to return in the spring with a largely increased train, but it seemed a pity to interrupt the work which had been begun, and to allow Sinim what must seem to her a last opportunity of capturing the country by a *coup de main*. Sir Robert could not bring himself to destroy entirely the old man's anticipations, since he also hoped against hope that help for Pahar might be forthcoming in the spring. An exclusively military Mission, perhaps, or one composed wholly of civilians—or might it not be that, seeing there was a prospect of gaining success and fame in the reclamation of Pahar, the Government wished to entrust the task to some friend of their own, and not to the man whom, having once deeply injured him, it was not in human nature to expect them to forgive? It was doubtless inevitable that the Dadkhwah should grasp at the tiny gleam of hope allowed him, and disregard the warnings which accompanied it. He promised readily to send out messengers to discover how far the Aksang Hindus had got on their way to Khamish, and to arrange for a farewell reception of the Mission by the Khan the day before they were expected, so that there might be as little delay as possible in the actual departure.

By this time the Khan had succeeded in tearing

## Blow upon Blow

himself from the summer villa, and was occupying the Eski Hissar,<sup>1</sup> the fortress-palace built by his grandfather, so that when the reception took place, it was a far more formal affair than those which had preceded it. The Mission dismounted before reaching the outer entrance of the palace proper—for the fortress was a town within a town, containing a mosque and many other buildings, and surrounded by a rampart and moat—and passed first through one covered gateway and then through another. Each gateway was guarded by soldiers, who received the visitors with every sign of the deepest respect—muskets laid on the ground, arms folded, eyes cast down—but the courtyard between was empty. Led by the Dadkhwah and a chamberlain bearing a white wand, they crossed another courtyard, the sides of which were lined with soldiers of the Khan's guard, in all the bravery of braided yellow kaftans, white girdles with silver buckles and pointed white felt hats turned up with fur, the officers distinguished by coats of scarlet English cloth and purple hats. After this blaze of colour, the absolute emptiness and silence of the next courtyard had something uncanny about it, and when Sir Robert was ushered into the hall which opened from it, there was still only one figure visible, that of the Khan standing at the far end. He was either under the influence of drugs, or wished to be thought so, for though he advanced a step to meet the Envoy and held out a limp and clammy hand in greeting, his eyes were without expression and his words meaningless. However, he seated Sir Robert beside him on the divan, and called to the Dadkhwah, who ushered in the other members of the Mission, and they sat down in a row beside their chief. It was impossible to exchange any conversation with the Khan, for even when he attempted to send the requisite polite messages to the Queen and the Viceroy he rambled and lost the thread of what he was saying, and the visitors were all glad when the *dastarkhana* was brought

<sup>1</sup> Old fort.

## England hath Need of Thee

in. Happily it was not a regular meal on this occasion, but merely a ceremonial feast, consisting of fruit, bread, biscuits and sweets, which were carried in by soldiers and placed on a coloured tablecloth, accompanied by green tea without milk or sugar. The Khan broke a loaf of bread and divided it, and before the close of the entertainment any crumbs which happened to have fallen on the ground were carefully gathered up and placed on the cloth. Then the dishes and the cloth itself were removed, and all stood up, the Europeans thankful to escape from the torture of sitting on their heels. The guests, as in duty bound, stroked their chins and murmured "Allahu Akbar," and awaited the Khan's "Khush amadid," which was the signal for departure. His eyes still held the same unresponsive look as he shook hands, and the Mission were conscious once more of the uncanny feeling which had beset them as they entered. The Dadkhwah was friendly as ever, and as he escorted them back to the Elchi Khana, Sir Robert arranged with him that Ismail Beg should accompany the Mission back to India, at his own intense desire. The Envoy cherished the faint hope that the sight of a youth of such promise might stimulate the Government to feel that Pahar under his rule would be worth helping, and he had intended to open the subject with the Khan. To send Ismail Beg back into exile at Aksang, which must bear the first brunt of a Sinite invasion, seemed foolish when there were no trustworthy troops to send with him, to leave him in Khamish would probably mean his death, and the father might be glad to know that he was safely disposed of for the winter. Since, however, the Khan was not in a state to be informed of this, the only thing to do was to settle matters with the Prime Minister.

The next morning Sir Robert rode out to inspect the Aksang refugees—fewer in number, happily, than those either from Khamish or from Kizil Rabat—who had arrived late the night before at the camping-ground appointed for them not far from the city. Grandier

## Blow upon Blow

and Harmar, with three sowars, accompanied him, and were to organise the caravan ready for a start on the morrow. The people of the city watched the Europeans pass in dull perplexity. In the spring they had joyously acclaimed these strangers, who came, as it seemed, prepared to safeguard Pahar against the enemy whose imminence was an ever-present fear. They had gone in and out, made various unpleasant remarks, disturbed several old customs held in high affection, foreshadowed a general stirring-up which was bound to be intensely disagreeable to people who only wanted to be let alone—and done no good whatever. There was the new regiment—the Regiment of Europe, as it proudly called itself—certainly it had been formed, but one regiment could hardly save the Khanate. Moreover, though the men had just reached the stage—dangerous in all armies, but specially so in an Oriental one—of being “fed up” with training, and thinking that they knew all that needed to be known, the Elchi Beg, on inspecting them, had warned them impressively that this was not the case. They had only learnt the very rudiments of a soldier’s business so far, he told them, and must devote themselves during the winter to practising these diligently under the tuition of the few to whom it had been possible to give a slightly more extended training—at which the Regiment of Europe collectively tossed its head and fumed. Therefore the people of Khamish felt, not unnaturally, that the Mission had failed to fulfil expectations, and wondered what had been the good of its coming at all. In which no one would have agreed with them more fully than the Elchi Beg himself, who was conscious that even if he had succeeded in averting the evil day for one year, it was highly probable that when it did come it would be even worse than would otherwise have been the case.

The Hindu camp was in the comfortless state that might have been expected after a forced march and a cold night. The felt huts had been duly erected beforehand, but the people had preferred their own wretched



shelters of two sticks and a piece of gunny-bag, and Mr Madhuji's head clerk, who was in charge of the arrangements, reported that they refused to put on the warm kaftans provided for them. Sir Robert called them together and harangued them, and leaving Grandier and Harmar to their task, turned back to the city. The morning was pleasant, again with that touch of autumn in the air, and he prolonged his ride, going half round the walls. He felt a strange drawing towards Pahar, and more especially to Khamish, and dry and dusty though its surroundings were at present, he saw them green and fresh, with that peculiarly English look which he had noticed in the spring. The thought that such a country should fall again under the domination of "filthy barbarians," as he called the Sinites in his wrath, was hateful to him, and it even crossed his mind that if he had been Arthur's age, and free from official ties, there might have been worse ways of spending a life than in heading a band of gentlemen adventurers for the rescue and the maintenance of Pahar. But the time was as unripe for such adventures as Arthur was unlikely to be inspired with the idea of undertaking them; the days of romance had died out with the annexation of Granthistan.

With Sabir Akhund at his heels, he had nearly reached the south gate of the city when he became aware that the crowds entering it were larger than was usual at this time of day. The country-people who flocked in to sell their produce in the market were much earlier birds—these seemed to have nothing to sell, and they were talking excitedly. Nor did they show the Envoy the courtesy, which had hitherto never failed, of standing aside with folded arms to give him passage; when they glanced at him at all, their looks, if not hostile, were apathetic. Sabir Akhund pressed close to his chief.

"Will your honour permit me to open a way through these fellows? They are absolutely shameless."

"No; wait," said Sir Robert. "There must be some reason for it. Can the Sinites be invading?"

## Blow upon Blow

"These people are not fleeing before an enemy. They carry nothing with them, neither do they look back in fear. They are dogs and sons of dogs, and need a lesson," said Sabir Akhund contemptuously.

"Yet there is a great cloud of dust on the road," said Sir Robert, standing up in his stirrups. "Can it be that troops have been sent from India without telling me? We will ride out a little way."

"Happy the day if it is so!" responded the youth fervently. "Yet I fear from the looks of these people that there is no good news, but evil."

Much perplexed, they rode back toward the south, and presently Sir Robert stood up in his stirrups again. "It almost looks—as if the caravan was coming back," he said. "Surely the passes can't be under snow already?"

As he advanced, a horseman detached himself from the moving figures in the cloud of dust and rode to meet him. It was Arthur, who waved his arm and shouted cheerily, "All well here!" But as he came closer, his uncle saw from his face that something was very wrong.

"The Sinites are in the valley where we met them before, holding the foot of the pass," he said in a low voice. "I couldn't force a passage with only two sowars, and they would not let us go past. I might have waited till you came along, but that would have meant more non-combatants, and I thought you ought to know at once."

"They turned you back by force?" said Sir Robert in stupefaction. "Then they must feel they have cut us off effectually from Raiyati, or they would never dare."

Arthur looked away. "Everybody says—the Sinites and the people nearer the frontier and all—and the *dakchi* who had just arrived and came on with me confirms it—that our force at Raiyati has been withdrawn," he said.

For a moment Sir Robert's face changed. "That is a sentence of death for all of us!" he said, but he

## 222 England hath Need of Thee

recovered himself in an instant. "This explains the attitude of the people we met. Bring your caravan on quietly, Arthur. I must go straight to the Elchi Khana, or they will be turning us out of it, and we must have a place to put our heads in."

Before Arthur could ask how he knew, or who should want to turn the Mission out, or why, Sir Robert had signed to Sabir Akhund, and they were cantering back towards the gate. The people who were still pressing in turned in surprise at the sound of the horses' feet, and mechanically made way for them; the soldiers on guard in the gateway, if not showing the usual tokens of respect, at least offered no opposition to their entrance. Sir Robert breathed more freely when they were once through, but he avoided the narrow streets of the bazaar, dark from their matting awnings overhead, and took a roundabout but more open way. Everywhere the people were gathered in eager groups talking, and turned to look at the two riders as they clattered by, but they made no hostile demonstration. The Elchi Khana could be approached from two directions, and the distance one way was a little shorter than the other. Somewhat to Sabir Akhund's surprise, the Envoy chose the longer route without a moment's hesitation. When they came in sight of the house, it seemed to the orderly that the mistake, as he thought it, was irreparable, for a number of men were building a barricade across the street, and they were shut off from the doorway. But Sir Robert flung at him the one word "Follow!" and setting spurs to his horse, leaped the uncompleted barrier, to the intense astonishment of the men at work on it, who fled in confusion. Sabir Akhund, not to be beaten, crashed over after his leader, his horse responding gamely to the unprecedented demand. The orderly had just time to note that the other end of the street was occupied by the Khan's guard, twenty deep, before following Sir Robert to the door, which was flung open as they approached, revealing the anxious faces of Dr Lakeney and the Tracker havildar.

"I'm awfully glad to see you back, Sir Robert," was the Doctor's greeting. "We couldn't think what had happened, and all sort of things came into our heads."

"Why—did they try to turn you out?"

"Rather,—came to say that the Khan required the premises for other guests, and that you had sent word we were to join you outside the city. That seemed hardly likely, since you had left everything behind, so we declined to move without written orders from you. Then they began to build us in, as you see."

"To build me out, I think," said Sir Robert. "What is the meaning of this?" he stood in the doorway and addressed the labourers who were now recovering from their discomfiture, indicating the futile barrier.

"We know nothing, Excellency. It was Hasrat's order," came in a chorus.

"Well, it is my order that you remove it at once, before I go to the Eski Hissar and complain of your conduct." To leave the Elchi Khana to go anywhere was the last thing he was likely to do at the moment, if the men had thought of it, but they did not. "It displeases me to find the entrance to my dwelling obstructed in this manner. Take the things away!"

A Yuzbashi of the guard swaggered down the street and confronted the Envoy. "Nothing is to be removed until the Elchi Beg and all his people have departed from the house."

"Please yourself," said Sir Robert lightly. "If the obstruction is not taken away by those who placed it there, I shall have it removed by blowing it up with gunpowder. My way may damage the town a little, I fear, but the blame will not be mine."

"Truly," said the Yuzbashi, appealing to his troops and the bystanders for moral support, "these are fine guests, who decline to depart when leave is given, and threaten to damage their host's property!"

"Precisely," said Sir Robert. "Guests. And what will his Highness say when I tell him how his

## England hath Need of Thee

guests, whom he has treated with so much honour and kindness, have been insulted by his servants? Yesterday he broke bread with me; the bond is between us. Yet to-day those who pretend to speak in his name try to chase me out of the city and rob me of my goods!"

The Yuzbashi was evidently sorely perturbed between the desire to retreat from an untenable position and dislike of showing himself beaten. "When guests outstay their welcome——" he began weakly.

"When the Envoy of the Empress outstays his welcome, he will learn the fact from his Highness himself," said Sir Robert. "What king would be so lacking in courtesy as to intimate such a thing through the medium of insults by his servants?"

"Remove the barrier!" said the Yuzbashi ferociously to the labourers. "Yet," he turned sharply upon Sir Robert, "it may be that your Excellency may one day desire to quit this house, and may not be able."

"To every day its own burden!" said the Envoy sententiously.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## ARMS AGAINST A SEA OF TROUBLES.

WITH the barrier removed from one end of the road and the guards from the other, the way was open for Arthur and his charges, who were allowed to enter the city and pass through the streets without opposition. Of course there was great excitement among the Hindus, and Mr Madhuji and several of his fellows came clamouring for an interview and explanations. Sir Robert declined promptly to see them till the evening, for apart altogether from the impolicy of yielding to their clamour, he felt it absolutely necessary to gather up the tangled threads of the situation, which was involved in obscurity. With the arrival of the *dakchi* he was able to realise what had before seemed impossible of belief, that the withdrawal of the Raiyati force was deliberately designed to bring pressure upon him to retire at once. The *dakchi* brought a duplicate copy of the telegram already received by special messenger, but he bore also an official letter, signed by Mr Brancepath, which showed that the blow was not delivered on any sudden impulse, but had been some time in preparation. The letter was querulous in tone, and alluded repeatedly to the complete knowledge Sir Robert had enjoyed throughout of the wishes of the Government. He knew that he was only sent to Pahar to remove the British subjects there, and the recommendations he had chosen to make with reference to remaining were

totally outside the scope of his instructions. Once more he was ordered to withdraw immediately, and since the position of the Raiyati force appeared to have served, with or without his concurrence, to raise false hopes in the mind of the Pahari Government, that force would receive orders to retire at once. Sir Robert smiled grimly when he read it.

"They tell me to withdraw, and make it impossible by destroying the only chance of withdrawing in safety," he said to Arthur, who was sorting the mail for him, Grandier being still out at the camp.

"Then we shall have to stay, I suppose, sir?" said Arthur cheerfully. "There's another telegram here."

"Stay? Yes—permanently, to all appearances. Ah, then your father had managed to get an inkling of the truth! This is from him." He spread out the sheet:—

"Fear plot gravely affecting you. Will spare no pains to discover and keep you informed. If too late, hold on. Will spend last anna rouse public opinion. Marian joins. GERRARD."

"Why does the Guv'nor call it a plot, sir? I suppose they had a right to change their minds if they wanted to."

"Quite so. Only, unfortunately, you see, there was a difference between my verbal and written instructions. The written ones ordered me to report on the alternatives of annexing Pahar, establishing a protectorate, or withdrawing altogether. But in conversation I was told that the evacuation idea was only mentioned in deference to the irreconcilables of the Cabinet, and that it was practically certain Pahar would be brought within our sphere of influence. With that end in view I was to make the various enquiries and recommendations I have done. Surely you must remember how the intention was allowed to creep out, and the public mind was smoothed down after getting a bit excited?"

"Then were they chousing you the whole time?"

"They should have said it was the verbal instruc-

tions—not the written ones—that were mere window-dressing, put in just to satisfy the British public for the moment. Now that they have served their purpose, and the public attention has been diverted to Ireland, we are to scuttle out of Pahar while England is looking the other way.”

“And you have nothing to show for the verbal instructions, sir?”

“How could I? I wrote out a full account of the conversations afterwards, and entrusted it to your father. Now I see that I ought to have got the various men I saw—Secretary of State and the rest—to initial it, but I didn’t. It didn’t occur to me that it was necessary—dealing with Englishmen. Well, we live and learn. I can prove nothing but that I misunderstood their intentions in a direction in which my own views were notorious, and the papers which thought all was well can only say that they attached a mistaken importance to my appointment.”

“Then can we do nothing, sir?”

The grim look returned. “That remains to be seen. If we can hold out here for the winter, I think for very shame’s sake they must relieve us when the passes are open again. After all, my orders as late as August were to remove the Indians, and they can hardly blame me for refusing to go without them. Your father will be keeping ’em lively, and old Brown will do his little bit, no doubt. If the people here are staunch, we ought to be able to live through it. But are they to be trusted? That attempt to get us out of this house looks ugly. I have sent the Argoon to Niaz Beg to ask for an explanation and an interview, and we can do nothing till he gets back. Is there a letter from your father? He will have written before he had discovered anything suspicious, but it may throw some light.”

Leaving his uncle to read Colonel Gerrard’s letter, Arthur turned to his own mail. He had a letter from Lady Charteris, who was his godmother, and always wrote to him for his birthday, so that the occurrence



was not so rare as to excite surprise. But as he opened the envelope he had a foreboding of its contents which proved only too true. His aunt wrote reminding him of their conversation before he sailed. The specialist had been right, a serious operation was necessary, and what was worse, he could not say certainly that it would be effectual. Lady Charteris wrote very calmly, her whole anxiety being for her husband. She had hoped against hope that he might be remaining in Pahar for the winter, so that all might be over before the icy mountain barrier allowed even letters to pass. But since there now seemed a probability of his being recalled before winter, she wished Arthur to know that if things went wrong, the letter or telegram would be addressed to him, and he must break the news to his uncle. She hoped it would not be necessary; at any rate he might be sure that she would undergo any number of operations if the result was to allow her husband to see her again. But in case of the worst, she enclosed a letter for Sir Robert, which was to be destroyed unopened if its use was happily unnecessary. Arthur looked across at his uncle, who was frowning over his own letter from his wife. He had put it aside as a treat to be enjoyed in the evening, but the Dadkhwah was delaying so long in answering his message that he had time for it now. There was some shade of difference in the handwriting that worried him.

"I know she isn't well!" he burst out. "Tells me she's taking every possible care of herself, of course. But she wants me to do it for her. She doesn't know how. Rheumatism in her fingers, I expect. I'll write and tell your father to drain the pond. What does it matter compared with her health? No, I can't write; no letter will get through. And they will never think of it. Nor even of taking her to Bath or some place for the waters. And she would never suggest it. She hates moving about."

"I'm sure she'll go if she feels she ought, sir," said Arthur consolingly. "She says in her letter to me

that she—er—will do anything to be quite well when she sees you again." He was half proud and half ashamed of this very free paraphrase, which had an instantaneous effect in lightening Sir Robert's gloom. "Besides, she couldn't possibly have started rheumatism so early."

"No, I suppose not. Perhaps I am only fancying the difference. But I wish I had the chance of sending just one letter to warn her to take care of herself. And no way of writing for Christmas, either! It's monstrous to have taken off the Raiyati people like this—monstrous!"

He looked through one or two other letters, then glanced at his watch. "No answer from the Dadkhwah yet! Tell Sabir Akhund to ask the men at the gate if they have seen any one in the distance who might be a messenger. He may have been afraid to come close."

But the answer was still the same. No one but the Hindus had approached the Elchi Khana since the barrier was removed. Sir Robert rose from his writing-table.

"I shall leave you in command here, Arthur, and take Lakney with me. It's unfortunate that Grandier and Harinar are both out at the camp, but you and the Sepoys can hold the gate, which is the main thing. I am going to the Hissar."

"To the Khan, sir? not the Dadkhwah?"

"It's too late for that. Strong measures are the only thing. Evidently Aga Mohammed's party have managed to nobble the Khan, and they must be nipped in the bud. Sabir Akhund must stay here. I can't risk losing him."

"But will the Khan see you, sir?"

"If he won't, I shall sit *dhurna* on his doorstep till he does."

"But—England, sir?"

"You mean that it ain't very dignified for a British representative to dance attendance on the pleasure of the Khan of Pahar—eh? Quite so, but I venture to

think British dignity would suffer rayther more if the Mission was starved out or wiped out, which is what we may look forward to if we can't come to some arrangement."

"But they will only be too glad if you put yourself into their hands, sir!"

"By sitting *dhurna*? Oh no. They're sufficiently in touch with Indian ways to know that if a creditor dies of hunger on his debtor's doorstep, the debtor is merely haunted by a hungry, complaining ghost. That's bad enough, anyhow, and who's going to make it a vengeful ghost instead? As a matter of fact, I have no present intention of becoming either kind of ghost just yet if I can help it, and that's the very reason why I must do something at once."

Reluctantly Arthur put his letters into his pocket and went out to give the necessary orders, which were received by the Doctor in a mood of high exaltation. He had been so stirred by the half-hour during which he and the Trackers had held the doorway that he was panting for fresh adventures, and he donned uniform with alacrity and mounted to accompany his chief. Arthur's instructions as commandant were neither numerous nor complicated. On no pretext whatever were he and his men to be induced to leave the Elchi Khana, and if attacked, he was to hold the doorway as long as possible, and then retire upon Sir Robert's house and defend it to the last. The extent of the grounds made it impossible to hold them with so small a garrison, and if an entrance was effected elsewhere the defenders of the gateway would be taken in the rear. Their position, thus threatened, would quickly become untenable, as it did not include a well, but in Sir Robert's courtyard was a fountain fed by a spring, which was his reason for choosing it as the scene of the final stand.

With their escort of sowars the Envoy and his companion set out, and to the surprise and curiosity of the people of Khamish, rode through the streets to the gateway of the Eski Hissar. Here their way

was barred by the guards, and Sir Robert made no attempt to force an entrance, merely sending in a message to the head chamberlain to request an audience of the Khan. For over half an hour all sat patiently on their horses, till a page or some similar underling made his appearance under the gateway and addressed the guards.

"Who are these outside?" he demanded, "and why do you suffer them thus to obstruct the way into Hasrat's house? Do your duty and drive them off."

The guards looked at the intruders, and perhaps felt that it was rather a large order. At any rate, they remained within their guardroom, which was a kind of embrasure contrived in the thickness of the archway, and appeared to be addressing remonstrances to the emissary, who retired presently with what were evidently threats upon his lips. Then followed another long time of waiting, awakening the intense interest of the population of Khamish, who crowded the other side of the wide street, at a discreet distance from anything untoward that might occur. The two Englishmen talked and smoked with all the *insouciance* and naturalness that they could assume, the troopers sat impassive as if carved out of stone. It was not a pleasant experience to be the target of the whispers and smiles and jeers of this degenerate people, who would not raise a finger to save themselves from a bondage which they feared and detested, and to a man of Sir Robert's character and record it was torture, but he held his ground. Not only his own life and those of his staff, but those of all the wretched Hindus assembled in the camp and at the Elchi Khana, depended on his extorting a workable arrangement of some sort from the Khan.

At last there was another arrival in the gateway from the interior of the palace. This time it was a chamberlain of low rank, bearing a plain wooden wand. He passed between the soldiers, and addressed the Envoy in the tones of one astonished and justly annoyed at his conduct.

"What behaviour is this on your honour's part?" he enquired shrilly. "But yesterday you were received with the utmost consideration by Hasrat, and decorated with signs of his favour. A *dastarkhانا* was spread, and you were sent away in peace with every ceremony that could be desired. How is it that you return unsummoned?—nay more, that you retain possession of the house lent to you by Hasrat, when your tenancy has ended, and he desires to use it for other guests? Are these the ways of one who serves a mighty ruler?"

"In one respect alone has his Highness failed in the obligation of hospitality," returned Sir Robert, "but that is of so grievous a character that it brings me back here."

"Oh, this is indeed well done, for one who has had kindness lavished upon him, to asperse the hospitality he has received!" cried the chamberlain, his eloquent gestures calling Heaven and the crowd to witness to the outrage. "Pray, of what does your honour complain?"

"Of the lack of a safe conduct out of Pahar. Never has it been known that a ruler neglected to give an ambassador free passage through his own territory, yet my vanguard has been turned back before reaching the frontier. Are these the orders of his Highness?"

The emissary appeared to be in a quandary. "Let your honour return to your place, and measures will be taken and duly communicated to you," he said.

"Not so. Until I know from his own mouth whether such an insult has been put upon the Envoy of the Empress by his Highness's order, I remain here."

The official withdrew, discomfited, and Sir Robert and the Doctor composed themselves for another period of waiting. This was even longer than those before, and it ended with the apparition of a figure whom they both failed at first to recognise as the Dadkhwah, so squalid and dishevelled was he in his rent clothes and crushed, dust-besprinkled headgear. Tears ran down

the old man's face as he tottered feebly through the gateway and bowed his head at Sir Robert's stirrup. He spoke fast and incoherently, explaining that the news of the morning had given an opportunity to Aga Mohammed and his partisans of which they had taken instant advantage. Their warnings against the British alliance were recalled, and the Khan persuaded that either Sir Robert was an impostor who was now disowned by his own Government, or that the English had never intended to help Pahar, merely to annex her, and were departing in disgust because they had failed to get possession of the country. Niaz Beg, daring to raise his voice in protest against this view of the matter, had been disgraced and driven from office, and was painfully apprehensive that as the result of Sir Robert's obstinacy he would also lose his head. Grasping the skirt of the Envoy's tunic, the old man poured forth his entreaties that the Elchi Beg would graciously retire, and fail to provoke the ruling powers further. Some arrangement should be made, the Elchi Khan should remain at his disposal and provisions be sent in, he should be kept informed of any diplomatic or other changes—everything possible should be done to content him, if he would only go away now. But Sir Robert shook his head.

"What is Aga Mohammed Beg doing now?" he asked.

"He desires that Hasrat should send ambassadors to Sinim," answered Niaz Beg with hanging head.

"To surrender the Khanate before it is even asked for?"

"Nay, Excellency. He declares that if Pahar asks humbly for the Imperial protection, and promises fealty, she will be admitted as a tributary kingdom, and allowed to enjoy her own laws and religion."

"I can offer no opposition to that—whatever I may think of the wisdom of trusting Sinim in such a matter, after your experience in the past," said Sir Robert. "His Highness and his advisers must act as is best in their judgment for Pahar. Yet I cannot pass over the

treatment accorded to my officers, and on that matter I must have speech of the Khan."

"It shall be arranged," pleaded Niaz Beg.

"It must be—to-day and here," said Sir Robert, and the old man departed with hanging head.

But after yet another period of waiting, he returned, and with him the head chamberlain, white wand in hand. The demand was granted. Sir Robert and the Doctor dismounted and followed their guides, the Doctor, at least, thinking involuntarily that the dark archway was uncomfortably suggestive of "All hope abandon, ye who enter here." They were ushered again through the different courtyards and gateways of yesterday, but without the signs of respect which had met them then, and were finally pitchforked—so sudden was their entrance into a smaller room below the level of the hall of audience—into the middle of the Khan's council. The ruler himself sat in the chief place, with lack-lustre eyes staring straight before him, but the leading spirit was evidently Aga Mohammed Beg, who, flushed with triumph, occupied a seat at his right. The councillors were clearly divided in opinion, one or two sharing Aga Mohammed's triumph, but most of them convinced against their will through fear for their heads. In the faces of these Sir Robert perceived a distinct expression of relief at his entrance. The Khan greeted him indifferently, bade his son move to give him room, and having seated him beside himself, relapsed into silence. Nothing could have better suited the mood of Aga Mohammed, already chagrined by finding himself, at this great moment, obliged to yield place to an outsider.

"We have considered your petition," he began imperiously, "which it would have been more fitting had you presented in suppliant-wise rather than seated beside the King. Since you desire safe conduct, it shall be given, through our intercession with the Amban of the Sinites. You shall have free passage through the territory of Pahar to the mountains. Since they lie in country you claim as yours, we

## Arms against a Sea of Troubles 235

are no longer responsible when you have reached them."

"The Beg Kuli Beg speaks?" said Sir Robert, in a tone so nicely balanced between assertion and question that the youth flushed angrily. The coveted title was not yet his.

"No," said the Khan suddenly and unexpectedly, and was silent again. But the interruption gave courage to one of the dissatisfied councillors to put in a word.

"Let the Elchi Beg pardon my boldness. Can your honour tell us why the displeasure of the Empress has risen against you so fiercely that she has withdrawn her soldiers who should have ensured you a safe journey?"

"I wish I could, but I can't," said Sir Robert frankly.

"Does she desire your honour's death?"

"No, that I am sure she doesn't. The troops may have been needed elsewhere, but it is more likely that Pahar was supposed to be able to supply all necessary protection."

The councillors exchanged wise nods, and such half-whispered remarks as, "The Empress is old"; "Doubtless she lives shut up from her people"; "Many are the flatterers of the great"; "In a man's absence his enemies gain the upper hand"; which, libellous as they were, Sir Robert was obliged to pretend not to hear. Then the first man spoke aloud.

"Will the esteem of the Empress for your honour revive when she learns of your peril?"

"I am quite certain," responded the Envoy gravely, "that if any evil fate befell the Mission, vengeance would be swift and deadly. Look throughout all Asia, and see whether an attack on a peaceful embassy has ever been passed over by the English. When it becomes known that we are in danger, I am certain the troops will return."

There was a distinct sensation. "Does your honour promise that they shall return?" asked another.



"I cannot promise, for I have no authority, but I am sure they will."

"Why waste time?" broke in Aga Mohammed rudely. Even after the snub he had received he could not sit meekly by to watch public opinion turn against him. "There is yet time for the Elchi Beg and all his Indians to cross the mountains. I myself will act as their advocate with the Amban of the Sinites, and entreat a free passage for them."

"And for yourself," said Sir Robert smoothly. "We could not part from you until we were safely in Bala."

"Do you say this to me, who could buy the friendship of Sinim for Pahar with your heads?" cried the youth ferociously. "You will go and you will not go, and all the time your lives are in my power. The choice is yours—safe-conduct to the mountains, where it falls to you to deal with any enemies you may meet, or to remain in Khamish at my mercy, whether I choose to spare you or to placate Sinim by your deaths."

But Aga Mohammed had gone too far. "Enough of this!" said the Khan, shaking off his lethargy with an effort. "You are too presumptuous, boy. Talk not of *my* power, *my* mercy, or you may come to feel the power of the king. The Elchi Beg is an honourable man; let him speak. Will the help from the English, which he has promised so long, arrive in the spring?"

"I think it is highly probable, but I cannot swear it," said Sir Robert. "Yet, let your Highness remember that if it does not, you have but to let the Mission depart with honour, and the way to Sinim is as open to you as it is now. I only ask delay, and I cannot believe that Pahar would not willingly wait one winter if it saw the chance of maintaining its freedom."

"Yet the Sinites have already crossed our border. Can we hope to keep them off?"

"They cannot possibly conduct a campaign in winter

from the position they now hold, with the desert between them and their homes. Call in all your subjects to the southward with their cattle and possessions, and the enemy will find neither food nor shelter. If they attempt to push through to Khamish, we shall be able to deal with them."

"Would your Excellency lead the army of Pahar?"

"That would hardly befit an ambassador. Yet your Highness has at hand one of your own blood——"

"You speak of my son Ismail Beg. Bring him to me, and he shall be made *lashkar-bashi*<sup>1</sup> at once. Truly I believe Heaven destines him for the throne, and not this bold talker who fights with his tongue. Inscrutable indeed are the decrees of fate, which leave me perforce undecided between two such sons! Yet I have always respected those decrees, and I will."

<sup>1</sup> Commander-in-chief.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## THE SHADOW OF THE FUTURE.

GREAT was the transformation scene which occurred at the Elchi Khana when Sir Robert and the Doctor returned thither, for with them came the Dadkhwah, himself restored to office and honourably robed, bringing with him a dress of distinction of the most elaborate kind for Ismail Beg, and a command to repair at once to his father's presence. To be promoted in one day from private to commander-in-chief was a gratifying advancement, but Ismail Beg did not appear uplifted. Possibly he realised that the new and giddy height to which he was raised might be a dangerous one, and privately he confided to Sir Robert that he would much prefer to remain his *makhram* than go to take command of the army. Reminded that in his new position he might be able to provide for the safety of his English friends, he assented gravely, but added, with a hint of that foreboding which was in the minds of all despite the diplomatic success of the day, "And you may be sure, sahib, that when I can no longer secure that safety, I shall return to you here, to share whatever fate may await you."

There seemed little reason for any anticipation of evil as he rode away in state with the Dadkhwah. The troops, both the old and the new, appeared pleased with his appointment, and the populace testified vociferous loyalty. Even the Hindus, when

they arrived for their interview with Sir Robert, appeared to believe that the victory had been won once for all, and that a new period of close attention to business and large profits lay before them. Their ardour was a little damped when the Envoy hinted that it might be well to restrict their anticipations in respect of profit, lest the people of Khamish should begin to reflect that even the Sinites could be no worse. However, since he allowed the timid persons who had been on the point of returning to India with him to go back to their homes in the city, they decided that he was only trying to frighten them, and that the Sinite danger might be regarded as definitely past. The Hindus from Aksang remained to be disposed of, for Sir Robert declined to allow them to return to the northern frontier. Some of them had relations among the Khamish Hindus, and were able to go to them, and the rest were quartered in unused buildings--stables and the like--in the Elchi Khana enclosure. They were not precisely agreeable guests, but accommodation had to be found for them somewhere, and it was not a desirable moment for any appearance of wishing to swamp the city with a fresh influx of Indians. Grandier and Harmar brought them in from the camp and distributed them to their new quarters, various improvements and alterations were promised for the morrow, and they consented to settle down. The immediate problems of this crowded day thus disposed of, the staff of the Mission, at Sir Robert's summons, met in his sitting-room after dinner to discuss the state of affairs.

"You must feel awfully satisfied to-night, sir," said Grandier--"to have turned a bad defeat into victory as you have."

Sir Robert shook his head. "Sometimes a hand-to-mouth policy is the only thing possible," he said, "but it is never one to be admired."

"I didn't quite understand, Sir Robert," said Dr Lakeney, "why you seemed to take it for granted to-day that there was to be no getting back to India

## 240 England hath Need of Thee

for us before the winter. We have only lost one day, and surely that couldn't make all the difference?"

"That could not, but the withdrawal of the Raiyati force does. If I had accepted Aga Mohammed's obliging offer of a safe-conduct to the Pahari boundary, we could have found the Sinites waiting for us just beyond it."

"But you can't really think, sir, that they would have the consummate cheek to attack a British official on British—or at any rate protected—territory? They would know it must mean war."

"There are one or two things you have to remember. First, is it a portion of the Sinite regular army that is down there trying to drive a wedge between us and home? I don't for a moment believe it is—even when you remember the very loose way in which the Sinite army is made up of contingents from different provinces raised by the Ambans and under their rule. It is much more likely to be a heterogeneous gathering of marauding tribesmen and discharged soldiers, very useful for mischief, but quite capable of being disavowed if the mischief brought trouble. Then again, they would probably have no unwholesome yearnings for a stand-up fight. To block the way over the mountains till the snow came, and then close in behind us so that we could not retreat, is much more their style. Moreover, we know they have done it before. Which of you was it went with me to those bone-caves nearly at the foot of the hills as we came through?"

"I did, sir," said Arthur. "And I," said the Doctor, and there was a moment's pause, as all remembered the horror, whether seen or described, of those heaps of whitening bones and poor fragments of clothes or household utensils, too poor to attract the spoiler of the dead, which were an abiding memorial of the crowds of fugitive men, women, and children of Pahar, driven into the caves by their ruthless foes to perish by hunger, cold, or suffocation.

"Don't know whether you have any particular fancy

for adorning a similar collection in future years. I haven't," said Sir Robert grimly. "Not that I wouldn't have made a fight to get through if there had been only ourselves and our men to consider. But there are the Hindus, and you know as well as I do that the difficulties of a caravan in these mountains increase in geometrical proportion to the number of persons travelling. It's not merely the provision of sufficient ponies and yaks and food and *yurtes* and warm clothes. It is the length of time taken by the caravan in passing a dangerous spot, the difficulty of taking advantage of the short intervals between one snowstorm and another. And when to that you add a numerous and persistent enemy, not trying to fight, but intent on blocking the passage through places where human nature is already tried to the uttermost to get through at all—why, then I say that to attempt to cross with a caravan and women and children at this season would be simple murder and suicide."

"You wouldn't think of leaving the Hindus here, and trying to break through ourselves, sir?" suggested Harmar hesitatingly.

"My orders were to remove all British subjects, and I don't withdraw and leave 'em to the Sinites," snapped Sir Robert.

"Might I suggest, sir," put in Grandier, covering Harmar's discomfiture, "that it might be well to try and get a message through, in any case? There's no knowing how your actions may be misconstrued when political considerations come in, as they do here. It might even be said that you stayed in Pahar because you preferred it."

"I don't care a hang what's said of me!" Sir Robert was still ruffled. "I stay in Pahar because I can't get away with honour. But messengers? By all means. I have the three picked out, and they will start as soon as the letters are ready, going by different routes. If they, or any of them, contrive to slip past the Sinites, and get over the mountains

before the snow comes, at least neither the Government nor our own people will have any doubt as to what has happened to us, or what must be done to help us in the spring. They can't do anything while the passes are closed, but the sooner a force is back at Raiyati ready for the melting of the snow, the more likely we are to get away alive."

"You said this morning that the withdrawal of the force was our death-sentence, sir," said Arthur. "Did you mean it?"

"I meant it literally at the time, and as you must all know pretty well, the sentence has very nearly been carried out to-day. At present, so far as I can see, the chances are about even."

"Surely, sir, the advantage lies with us?" said Dr Lakeney.

"For the moment. Don't make too much of our dramatic conquest of the council this afternoon. There's no 'lived happy ever after' in these countries—more like 'to be continued in our next.' The Khan is on our side just now, but why? Not because Aga Mohammed threatened us with monstrous treatment, but because Aga Mohammed encroached on his father's prerogative. Who is to say that Ismail Beg mayn't do the same some time or other, with the result of turning the Khan against us again? His drugs have destroyed his will-power to such an extent that it's an absolute impossibility for him to keep a straight course. And now that Aga Mohammed has been made to look a fool before the whole council, he will have that against us besides all his previous objections."

"You think he will try to hand us over to the Sinites, Sir Robert?" asked Grandier.

"I have no doubt he would be delighted to try, but I am very much mistaken if the Sinites would accept the gift. They won't rush into war if they can help it, and they would know that to wipe us out would simply be asking for war. But if they can get rid of us by using some such tool as Aga Mohammed, they'll jump at the chance. Remember how that poor chap

Barbary was murdered, not by the Sinite authorities—oh no!—but by tribes not yet brought properly under Sinite rule. Why, they might even justify the annexation of Pahar by saying that they took it over to prevent such things happening in future!”

“Those are the chances against us, then,” said Arthur. “What have we got in our favour, sir?”

“We have Ismail Beg, who has shaken off his follies in a way that does one good to see, and the Dadkhwah, who will be faithful to us unless things get very dangerous for himself. Then the general sentiment of the people is undoubtedly on our side and against the Sinites—but the danger there will be that if they once come to believe that Sinim resents their harbouring us, we shall be in a very tight place. We have a fair position for defence, a reasonable supply of stores and ammunition, and we can all, I hope, rely on one another and our men. And though I don't want to hurt Grandier's feelings, I can't help saying that I am not sorry to have lost Colonel Brown, for he certainly manages to rub people the wrong way.”

Grandier laughed with some constraint, and the gathering broke up. Sir Robert had acted deliberately in acquainting all his staff with the dangers of the situation. He and the men of his day had consciously carried their lives in their hands for months together, and had lost nothing either of dash or steadiness by reason of the knowledge. This weaker generation should have the same chance. It was only natural that a man of his upbringing should translate ‘weaker’ as ‘softer,’ and not as ‘more sensitive,’ and scoff at any suggestion of the later quality, as he had done in his friend Gerrard's case in the old days. It was a curious fact that these modern young fellows all seemed to have a touch of the namby-pamby which was the one thing that spoiled Gerrard—a tendency to look forward and speculate about things instead of going straight ahead and doing them. There was Harmar, now—good steady young chap, true as steel; but there was a look in his eyes to-night as if he saw



something dreadful approaching and could not avoid it, and among the rest there had been none of the loud talk and jesting that would have passed at such a juncture among the men of forty years ago. They were all quite right underneath, Sir Robert was convinced of that. As he wrote to his wife that very night, still forming his resolute letters a little stiffly, as with a hand more accustomed to the sword than the pen:—

“The young fellows are all very quiet, but ready for anything. If the modern subaltern ain't as lively as the old one, it's only a change of fashion, though it leaves the poor old buffer feeling a bit out of it.”

He must see that these boys had plenty to do, so as to keep them from thinking about unpleasant possibilities, and then they would give as good an account of themselves as though they too had passed through Addiscombe and come out round the Cape.

The three messengers started the next day, with orders to separate before reaching the frontier, and try to get into the mountains by different routes, and soldiers were sent out with instructions to the population sparsely inhabiting the districts through which the Mission had passed on its arrival to abandon their homes and retreat upon the capital, bringing with them their cattle and stores, and removing the poles which marked the track across the sand. This precaution proved useful, for since the expected caravan did not arrive from Khamish, a body of marauders set out from the frontier to meet it, but losing their way in the sands, straggled hopelessly in every direction, only a few half-dead wanderers reaching the cultivated land round the city, where they were beset by overwhelming numbers of the farm-people armed with agricultural implements. Their bodies, carried triumphantly through the streets, were all that Khamish saw of the foe from the southward, and the Pahari army exulted as though it had gained a tremendous victory.

Winter was coming on in earnest now, and the members of the Mission were getting out the thick clothes they had worn in crossing the mountains, and buying furs and high boots and felt kaftans in the bazar. But before the caravan-roads were finally closed, it proved that Sir Robert had been premature in enumerating one of the circumstances in the party's favour. A traveller, attended by three servants, who arrived one night at the door of the Elchi Khana muffled in innumerable wrappings, turned out to be Colonel Brown, who had heard the news of the withdrawal of the Rayati force when he neared the Bala frontier, and had promptly returned to cast in his lot with the Mission.

"But the ladies! the Hindus!" was the general cry, as he divested himself of his outer garments with vast pride on Sir Robert's verandah. They seemed hardly necessary, for conscious virtue enfolded him like a cloak.

"I left Zaman Khan in charge of the caravan," he replied cheerfully. "He knows the way as well as I do. The Hindus will go to their homes in Bala, of course, and Miss Travis and Noel to Albin. What else should they do, I should like to know?"

"I should hope they would go on to Sheonath, or even get through to Gajnipur," said Sir Robert, "rather than spend the winter all by themselves in those solitudes."

"They'd better try it!" said Colonel Brown with glee. "Zaman Khan has his orders, and you may be sure they won't move a step beyond Albin. They'll be well looked after in every way, I can tell you."

"Perhaps they may be thankful you did not drag them back here," said Sir Robert, not without sarcasm. "But I don't mind telling you, Brown, that this return of yours is a bit of a blow. I was counting on you to do a good deal in stirring up opinion at home."

Colonel Brown swelled with pride. "D'ye think I forgot that?" he demanded. "First thing I thought of! I knocked off one or two little things

in camp at night, articles and letters—regular stingers, some of 'em—and addressed them to the old place. Zaman Khan has charge of them too, and will get them posted at the first opportunity. Most important, of course, but nothing compared with coming back to give you a hand here. I knew what the reinforcement would mean to you."

His hearers doubted very much whether he did, but his arrival at any rate added one more European to their ranks, which might be an advantage if things came to a fight. They did their best to dissemble their feelings, therefore, and it was hardly possible for him to imagine himself unwelcome, so that any lack of warmth passed unnoticed.

"That old ruffian!" said Arthur to Grandier in their own quarters. "The idea of his shutting up those two poor ladies at Albin all winter! Why, it's as bad as putting them in prison! I don't believe Miss Noel will be able to stand it. So often she has said how she hates the loneliness and the monotony——"

"What in the world has it got to do with you?" demanded Grandier, so savagely that Arthur jumped. He recognised the justice of the question. He had no right to comment on any arrangements made for Noel. Yet, though he tried hard to put her out of his thoughts, she haunted his dreams--her little pale face growing paler and more pinched as she roamed those bare, book-lined rooms, or paced the verandah with almost unendurable impatience of the long uneventful days, while poor Miss Travis sat huddled in shawls over the fire with Bumpus on her knee, her crippled hands unable even to knit. They were like two ladies shut up in an enchanted castle, with no knight to rescue them. If Noel's thoughts had flown to Grandier last winter, when things were not so bad, how they must dwell on him now, when her lot was so much harder, and she had learnt to care for him, even if only a little, and after so long a time! Half asleep, half awake, Arthur's thought at the

moment was that he would do anything, give anything, to get Grandier safely to Allin and to the girl who was looking for him there. No wonder he was savage when he knew himself helpless to go where he was so much needed!

These months of the early winter passed quietly enough. The Mission were still, or again, honoured guests, and hunting-parties were arranged for them, while in return they initiated the Paharis into the mysteries of skating, having discovered a craftsman who, under instruction, succeeded in producing something not unlike the old-fashioned skates with a wooden sole which were still generally used in England. That they spent a good deal of time in these frivolous pursuits was not their fault. They would fain have employed themselves in drilling the male population of Khamish in anticipation of a hostile move on the part of Sinim in the spring, but the male population of Khamish did not see it. As Sir Robert had said months before, they were too comfortable. Like their scenery, their manner of life was reminiscent of England. Their warm houses, their baths, their cookshops, all suggested the West rather than the East, and they had no mind to leave them in winter, just when they could best be appreciated, for camp life in the snow. Being Mohammedans, the connoisseurs among them could not criticize discriminatingly the special wines of various hostelrys, but they could, and did, visit this cookshop to sample its famous mutton pies, or that one for its barley broth. Their cooks were famous throughout Asia, and it would have been unpatriotic to allow them to languish unchecked by public appreciation. They hated the Sinites and upheld the freedom of Pahar as strongly as anybody, and if an invasion came would all rush to arms to repel it, but they could not see the use of drilling beforehand. Decidedly they were very like the English!

Christmas passed, necessarily unmarked by any parcels or letters from home, since Pahar was as

completely shut off from India and the Empire as though it lay in a different planet. The escort and the servants came to pay their respects and receive presents in return, and the staff and Colonel Brown dined with Sir Robert. It was not a very cheerful occasion, though the orthodox Christmas dishes appeared on the bill of fare, and absent friends were duly toasted. The emptiness and monotony of the life was having its influence on all, and there was a hovering shadow of apprehension in the background which no one could succeed in ignoring, though all affected to do so.

They calculated afterwards that it must have been on Christmas Day that the Sinite emissary arrived in Khamish. He did not make a sensational entry, and they heard nothing about him until he had been gone for a week, when certain rumours percolating from the bazar through the medium of the servants led Sir Robert to question the Dadkhwah. The old man replied with every appearance of frankness. Oh yes, the visitor had come and gone, just as the Elchi Beg said. But it was not an embassy—nothing of the kind—merely a private visit, since he was the head of the clan to which Aga Mohammed's mother belonged. At least, so it was intended, but when the chief was established in the palace it appeared that owing to his near neighbourhood to the Sinite frontier he had been entrusted with certain proposals from the Sinite authorities when it was known that he purposed a visit to Khamish. No, the Dadkhwah could really not remember what the proposals were. They were preposterous, and had been instantly rejected—of that, at any rate, he could assure his Excellency. The very fact that the Elchi Beg had not been called into consultation on the matter showed that they had not been taken seriously for a moment. It was all highly satisfactory, but Sir Robert gave a quiet hint to the Babu who managed the Mission commissariat to get in supplies unostentatiously. In the intense cold, meat was sold frozen as in Russia,

and it was easy to lay in a store. Grain was less easy to obtain without attracting attention, for though there was plenty to be had, immemorial custom made the grain-market the centre of the social and commercial life of Khamish, and any large purchaser was instantly noted by the experts who watched the fluctuations of price. But grain of some sort was a prime necessary for feeding the Hindus, who would not eat meat, and Sir Robert urged on his purveyor until, by dint of buying one kind of cereal here and another there, in large or small quantities as opportunity offered, he had stored up three months' supplies.

There were two or three small worries about the end of January, none of them sufficient in itself to cause anxiety, but tiresome because they all happened at once. Ismail Beg had trouble with the army. Apparently he had drawn the reins of discipline a little too tight in his eagerness to bring the old *taifurchis* and musketeers up to the standard of the Regiment of Europe, and possibly the men from that regiment who were distributed through the other corps as instructors had displayed the usual failings of those who are dressed in a little brief authority. At any rate, there were loud complaints, and a demonstration in the palace courtyard, appeased by a liberal distribution of largesse on behalf of the Khan, and a promise of increased pay for the future to all soldiers trained on the new lines. This calmed the minds of the troops and quelled the tumult, but created a fresh difficulty for Sir Robert, who had not been consulted, in the necessity of providing the money. The Khan sent to demand it with the utmost coolness, evidently thinking that he deserved well of the Mission for quelling the mutiny. The money earmarked for irrigation purposes had to be sacrificed to redeem the promise given, and Sir Robert had to impress upon a sulky ruler that such promises must not be made in future without consulting him, so long at least as he remained in nominal charge of the treasury.

## 250 England hath Need of Thee

He was not a fanciful man, but it seemed to him, as he rode back from the Eski Hissar that day, that the people eyed him with something of dislike. There were no hostile manifestations, but there was no friendliness, and not the smallest approach to that ecstatic joy with which his every appearance in public had been greeted six months ago.

## CHAPTER XX.

## IN THE TOILS.

ONE night in February the dwellers in the Elchi Khana found it impossible to sleep. From all the huddled dwellings outside the limits of their enclosure there came the sound of wailing. It rose and fell all night through—the full shrill notes throbbing on the still air. The sentries were much disturbed in mind, for in the absence of any news to account for a general mourning in the city, they considered the sounds supernatural, and Sir Robert thought it well to double their numbers and visit and relieve them frequently. He and his assistants went the rounds constantly during the night, stamping to keep themselves warm, even in their thick coats and fur caps, for the temperature was far below freezing-point. When the late wintry dawn came, there was nothing unusual to be seen, save that it seemed strange, as time went on, that none of the usual vendors of provisions or cooked food appeared in the open space in front of the doorway. Only a few people passed at all, and they hugged the houses on the opposite side of the street, and hurried by with averted faces, as though the Elchi Khana were a pest-house.

“Look here, sir,” said Grandier, detaining Sir Robert as he passed the building used as an armoury, which was two-storeyed and commanded a view of the street; “there’s something very queer going on. You may have to wait a minute or two; it isn’t every one that does it.”



Because they were watching, it was natural that for five or ten minutes the only passers-by should be those who hurried and looked away, but then came a man who not only glanced towards the Elchi Khana, but picked up a clod of frozen mud and threw it in the direction of the door, muttering what was evidently a curse.

"That's about the fourth I've seen do that," said Grandier. "As if we were murderers or something."

"It looks as though the Khan must be dead," said Sir Robert thoughtfully. "I suppose to a lively imagination we might seem to be to blame, for we have certainly worried him a good deal. That would explain the wailing, too. But it's curious that Ismail Beg has not sent word."

"Is he in a condition to do it, sir?" shrewdly.

"You mean that Aga Mohammed may have been beforehand with him? It's possible, of course, but I can hardly imagine he would let himself be wiped out without putting up some sort of fight, and we have heard nothing of that kind. Well, we must find out what has happened. The cooks had better go to the bazar as usual, and see whether the people will talk. Tell Harmar to pick out two or three steady sepoys to go with them in mufti, with good strong *lathis*<sup>1</sup> in case of an attack. We will be on the watch to cover their retreat, so they are not to fight unless they are hard pressed."

The cooks displayed a modest diffidence about going marketing in such doubtful circumstances, but were reassured by the provision of an escort, and at last consented to start, the soldiers—purely for purposes of disguise, as they insisted on pointing out—officiating as cooks' mates and carrying the baskets. About half an hour passed, and then there came a sound of tumult from the direction of the market. Suddenly round the corner of the street shot Sir Robert's fat cook, his turban off, the thick kaftan in which he usually huddled himself in this ungenial climate flying

<sup>1</sup> Sticks.

in rags, and a yelling crowd at his heels. He would have hurled himself on the bayonets of the guard, who had been drawn up outside the door as a measure of precaution, had they not opened to let him through. Following him in no sort of order came the mob, the other cooks, each man the centre of a hostile circle, and the three Trackers, the last keeping manfully shoulder to shoulder, and defending themselves stoutly with their sticks. They bore the marks of severe hustling, though not so severe as that inflicted on the cooks, whose panic must have made them a tempting prey, and they combined coolly to break through their assailants when they saw deliverance at hand. They were soon safely inside the passage, but to rescue the cooks it was necessary for Harmar to call out the sowars, who were waiting with their horses inside the doorway in case of need, and use them as mounted police. Beating back the crowd with the flat of their swords, they succeeded in bringing in the wretched fugitives, half dead with fright, though the mob closed in again on their heels, and would have burst through into the passage after them, but for the line of bayonets which once more barred the doorway. There was a good deal of pushing and shouting, but no one wished to be the first to make personal acquaintance with the gleaming blades, and at last the crowd drew off and retired to the other side of the street, where it shrieked insults and threw stones, but no more.

Sir Robert's anxiety to know what was wrong was not much allayed by the report of the explorers. They did not think the Khan could be dead, as there were no signs of public mourning, and business was being carried on as usual, though the people were gathered in knots, talking angrily. They had been allowed to enter the market, but found it impossible to get served, and presently a crowd collected and began to hustle them. The soldiers declared they could have brought the whole party off without worse molestation but for the terror of the chief cook, who called upon his

subordinates to run, and himself set the example. All the buyers and sellers in the bazar then naturally joined in the chase, and but for the fact that the Paharis, being a peaceable people, were little in the habit of carrying arms, the party would hardly have escaped alive.

All morning the mob remained outside the Elchi Khana, fluctuating in numbers as in busyness, but invariably large and hostile, until the tramp of horse was heard, and Ismail Beg came down the street like a thunder-burst at the head of a body of cavalry. The crowd fled before him, and he detached half his troop to keep them on the run, then, leaving the rest outside, entered the building. The escort were drawn up to receive him, but he barely returned their salutation, glancing round as though in astonishment to find the atmosphere inside the doorway so little troubled.

"I have come as quickly as I could, sahib," he said eagerly to Sir Robert, who came to meet him, "but there was a mob outside the Hissar which had to be dispersed, and the ringleaders hunted down. I feared they might have attacked you—I did not know even whether I should find your abode still standing—but I see you have suffered no harm."

"A few bruises to some of the servants," said Sir Robert lightly. "But what has happened? His Highness is in good health, I trust?"

"Yes, Hasrat is well. And so also—" bitterly—"is my brother Aga Mohammed Beg. But the Sinites have fallen upon Aksang and Kizil Rabat, and killed every man, woman, and child in both cities."

"I see," said Sir Robert, after a pause of consternation; "and the people lay the blame on us?"

"They are all fools. They say that if you, sahib, had not been here, we should have come to an accommodation with Sinim last spring, or at any rate when my brother's uncle was here six weeks ago, and this massacre would have been averted. As if the Sinites had ever observed any treaty when it was convenient to them to break it!"

"His Highness has not been persuaded to turn against us again."

"His malady is very heavy upon him, and he has been unable to give any orders. Sahib, I desire your advice. At present the army is with me, and my brother and his friends have not been able to make common cause with the rioters, because I have them all guarded in their houses. Is it your advice that I make things safe for the future by sending Aga Hammed a cup of coffee?"

The sinister suggestion came from his lips so easily that it was clear he regarded it as the proper way of meeting the situation, yet the fact that he had asked advice on the matter at all showed that he had his doubts as to the light in which his European friends would view it. Sir Robert shook his head.

"That is not the way of the English," he said.

"Not in the usual course of things, I know, but at a crisis like this? Sahib, it is his life or mine. To-day he is in my power. Another day I may be in his."

"No. Keep him safely under guard, imprison him if you like, but he has done nothing that calls for death."

"How long should I live if he stood in my place?" asked Ismail Beg bitterly. "And how can I lead my troops against the Sinites, knowing that I leave him behind to seduce the hearts of the people?"

"Take him with you," suggested Sir Robert.

"And find he has corrupted half the army, so that they turn against me in the next battle? Nay, sahib, there is but one way of safety. I will not take it if you forbid, but I know well I shall regret it bitterly if I spare him."

"Silly ass!" muttered Grandier to Arthur. "Why didn't he do it when he had the chance instead of coming here and bleating about it? The Chief couldn't have said anything."

"If you don't look out, he'll regard you as a sympathiser, and ask you to do the job," returned Arthur warningly, as Sir Robert shook his head again.

"Can't be done, believe me. If you are to fight on the side of the English, you must fight as the English do."

Ismail Beg sighed heavily. "I thought you would say so, sahib, but I hoped to be able to leave things safe behind me."

"You are starting for the frontier at once, then? The line of the Yeshil Su is safe?" The two cities which had been destroyed were the advanced posts of Pahar, standing on the very confines of the Khanate, with a tract of desert in their rear, and Sir Robert had advised from the first that no attempt should be made to hold them if Sinim declared war. The true frontier was the Yeshil Su or Yellow River, which formed the north-eastern limit of the cultivated land of Pahar proper, and here points for defence had been selected and garrisoned. It was true that the river line could be turned further to the east, where the water found its grave in the thirsty sands, but this would involve a long desert march, difficult at any season, and practically impossible in the winter, when an invading army would be frozen to death in the woodless, shelterless wastes. Should such an attempt be made, and a portion of the enemy's force struggle through as by a miracle, it was to be dealt with by a strong body of light horse with its base at Khush Urda.

"Yes, we go to-morrow. I have not seen Hasrat so much interested for years as he was last night, when the news arrived. He sent for me to his presence, and discussed the measures to be taken for keeping the army supplied. He desires to bid farewell to the troops in person, and sends by my mouth a request to your Excellency to be present on the occasion."

"Yet this morning he can't even give orders for the protection of the Mission?" Sir Robert's eyes and Ismail Beg's met, and the younger man threw up his hands with a helpless gesture.

"Sahib, what can I say? I think all is well. These

fits of illness are generally short. What reason is there that Hasrat should turn against you, as you seem to imply? Yet how can I wonder that you are doubtful? Your attendants are invited as well as yourself, but I suppose you would not take them all?"

"You may be quite sure I shall not leave this place unguarded. Yet I think some of us must go. It may be, as it appears, a gracious thought on his Highness's part to assure the populace of his continued confidence in us. Where is the review to take place? I am not so sure of the wisdom of waiting even for his Highness's farewell."

"I have thought of that, and yet it seemed to me that the assurance of Hasrat's favour was worth the delay. We shall march out to-night, which will enable me to inspect the camp equipment. Tomorrow Hasrat will ride out to us on the northern road, and the army will march past him on its way to the Yeshil Su. He will doubtless expect the usual foolish displays in his honour, but they shall be confined to the untrained men, whom I am keeping as rearguard."

"I don't see that you can do better," said Sir Robert encouragingly, for Ismail Beg still seemed downcast. Suddenly he looked up, as though he had come to a resolution.

"Unless—Sahib, what would you think of accompanying me with all your attendants? I believe the army is faithful to me, and in their midst you would at least be safe. No one could be surprised that I should desire the help of your experience and training in war."

Sir Robert was a good deal touched. "Quite impossible," he said, "but it is like you to have thought of it. I am accredited to your father here, and I could hardly go out with you to fight against a country with which England is at peace—especially when I am bound to return to India as soon as possible, and you are going precisely the opposite way. But above all,

## England hath Need of Thee

there are the Hindu refugees. I can't leave them here, and I couldn't cumber your army with them. So you see it can't be done."

"I feared it would be so," said Ismail Beg, and took his departure sadly, leaving a guard of soldiers outside the Elchi Khana to obviate further attentions from the mob. He also sent in a quantity of provisions later in the day, so that the inmates suffered no discomfort from their isolation. The wailing in the city broke out again as evening came on, but there was no demonstration in the morning, as Sir Robert prepared to start for the review. Before he had even left the doorway, however, there came a messenger from Ismail Beg. The Khan had been seized with sudden indisposition, and must postpone his inspection of the troops to the following day. This was bad enough, in view of the imperative need for haste, but it was worse that precisely the same thing should happen one, two, and three days thereafter. Sir Robert, becoming anxious, sent to ask Ismail Beg and the Dadkhwah for explanations, even venturing to suggest at last that it might be advisable for the army to leave without being reviewed by his Highness. Whether the prospect of such a breach of etiquette stung the Khan into activity, or whether his son and his Minister combined to make forcible representations to him, he promised to be present without fail on the fifth day, and Sir Robert rode out with Arthur and Harmar and the sowars. It was a bitterly cold spring day, the east wind as biting as in England, but with an added dryness that stung the skin to burning, and charged with cutting sand-particles from the desert over which it had come. The army was encamped about ten miles to the north of the city, and Ismail Beg exhibited it with pride to Sir Robert as they rode along the lines while waiting for the Khan. It was a motley array, ranging from the Regiment of Europe, drilled and equipped with some approach to modern methods, to a company of "tigers"—men attired in striped yellow and black, and with pointed ears to their mask-

like caps, who were seriously intended to terrify the enemy by their appearance and their tigerish mode of attack. Between the two extremes came the cavalry, unapproachable in their mastery of their horses, but from the European point of view totally undrilled, and the *taishirchis*, whose performance with their clumsy weapons was a creditable testimony to the constant practice insisted upon of late. Against disciplined troops the whole array would have been useless, but it was to be hoped and expected that the armies of the frontier Ambans would be no better, if so good.

The inspection continued until both the troops and the visitors had had a good deal more than enough of it, and from sending anxious glances in the direction of Khamish Ismail Beg had gone so far as to despatch mounted messengers to meet his father on the road and tell him he was urgently looked for, but in vain. The Dadkhwah had arrived long ago, with the various state officials whose dwellings were not actually within the precincts of the court, and at Sir Robert's suggestion Ismail Beg held a brief council of war. The reports from the frontier showed that the Sinites had appeared on the line of the Yeshil Su, and though not pushing home their attacks, were harassing the garrisons of the posts, who had no spare troops to despatch against them. Four days had been absolutely wasted in waiting for the Khan to inspect his army, and there was no guarantee that the same state of things might not continue indefinitely. This was the more probable since a scandal-monger had confided to the Dadkhwah, under strict promise of secrecy, that he understood a caravan was arriving that day from Iran, with a troupe of dancing-girls specially destined for his Highness's entertainment, and large consignments of perfumes and drugs, including a totally new preparation of the Khan's favourite intoxicant. That a caravan should arrive at all in the winter meant that elaborate and expensive preparations must have been made for it at all the



posting-stations along the route, and that soldiers had been detailed to guard it from the wandering tribes. Such an expenditure, with the Khan te tottering to its foundations, and a foreign enemy already within its borders, seemed to show that the Khan was beyond hope, yet there were grave demurs when Ismail Beg, stung to revolt, declared passionately in favour of leading on the army to the Yeshil Su without waiting longer for his father. The Dadkhwah considered that such unseemly haste showed a lack of respect for the operations of fate, and of the veneration due to a parent, though he found difficulty in answering when asked if he thought the Khan would prefer a respectful son and no kingdom, or a kingdom saved by a son who under stress of circumstances had failed in ceremonious observance. Sir Robert, appealed to by all, gave his advice unhesitatingly for advance on military grounds, yet he was conscious of some inward doubt. There was evidently something going on that he did not understand, and he suspected that it was in some way connected with the mysterious caravan. Yet when Ismail Beg, at his suggestion, appealed urgently to those present to offer any explanation that occurred to them, no one had anything to say. To waste his people's substance on women and personal luxuries at such a moment was so characteristic of the Khan that it had not struck them to see anything suspicious in it. There was this much of good to be expected, that the Khan would probably be so busy and happy for some time as to have little inclination for the affairs of state, and it might even be that the campaign might be carried through without interruption from him, and the army return without his remembering that it had started without his benediction. Therefore it was at length decided, though not without misgiving, that Ismail Beg and his troops should proceed at once to the theatre where they were so greatly needed.

The ride back to Khamish on tired horses, in the

bitter wind, was not exhilarating, and Sir Robert wondered more than once what could be done if the guards at the gate refused to allow him to enter the city. But they admitted him without question, though the signs of respect shown were not improbably intended for the Dadkhwah, who was riding with him. The streets were curiously deserted, and the houses shut up as if it were midnight. Sir Robert thought this was owing to the cold, but the Dadkhwah seemed to find it unusual, and suggested casually that they should ride past the chief Serai, and see whether any caravan appeared to have come in during the day. It was quite clear that one had, and a large one, for the great double courtyard was overflowing with men and animals, and out of all the brick-built chambers ranged in two storeys along the walls voices were bawling in all the tongues of Central Asia for fire, hot water and tea. One thing struck Sir Robert. There was no sign of the characteristic Irani head-dress, the high black flowerpot-shaped cap—rather did the costume of the new arrivals suggest the mingled Sino-Tartar tribes who lived east, and not west, of Pahal, with its flat felt cap pulled down over the ears.

"*This* caravan never came from Iran," said the Dadkhwah, putting the Englishman's thought into words, and they rode on, noticing that it was in the immediate neighbourhood of the Serai that the people seemed to have shut themselves up most resolutely in their houses. Elsewhere there were a few passers-by, though they hurried along as if in terror, and displayed a marked objection to being addressed. Neither Sir Robert nor the Dadkhwah cared to formulate aloud any theory as to the day's events in the city, but when they reached the gate of the Elchi Khana Niaz Beg addressed his companion earnestly.

"I will communicate with your Excellency as early as possible to-morrow. If in no other way, I will send a boy who shall throw a clod of dry earth at

your sentry here. Let some one pick up the clod and pretend to throw it back at the boy, to frighten him away, but let him keep it in his hand. A message will be inside. And if I be not too bold, let a strict watch be kept to-night, and suffer no one inside the walls of the Elchi Khana to leave it. You are supplied with food?"

"For a certain time," replied Sir Robert cheerfully as he entered the doorway. The three left in charge were full of curiosity as to the day's doings. They had been unmolested, but this was partly due to the arrival of the caravan, which had drawn away the loiterers who had spent most of the preceding days eyeing the Elchi Khana askance from afar. Anxious to discover the reason for this transfer of interest, Colonel Brown had conceived the bright idea of disguising himself as a Mussulman from the Caucasus, and going out to mingle with the crowd. He could not get near enough to the caravan to see properly of what it consisted, but he was able to find out that it had come in by the east gate of the city, and was largely composed of the tribesmen against whom he cherished a special grudge for their spoliation of Khush Urda. The people disliked and feared them, as was evident from the scraps of conversation he heard in the crowd, but what was more disquieting, he gathered that in some way their coming was regarded as being due to the British Mission. It was a mystery to him why he could not succeed in drawing people into conversation and finding out something more, but all his attempts were received with so much suspicion that he thought it wiser to desist. It is to be feared that his friends laughed when they heard this; Colonel Brown was so very unlikely—even, or perhaps especially, when in disguise—to impress any one as a harmless stranger anxious only to pass the time of day. Therefore there was nothing to be done but to wait with what patience they might the Dadkhwah's message. It was ominous that he found it necessary to send it secretly, as he had thought

might be the case. It was very brief, destitute of all the flowing compliments which should adorn an official communication:—

“Three Sinite envoys arrived with caravan, and are lodged in palace. Aga Mohammed Beg welcomed them.”

## CHAPTER XXI.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

DISQUIETING though the Dadkhwa's message was, it was yet more disquieting by reason of what it might portend. It was clear that Aga Mohammed Beg's party had been merely scotched, not killed, by his brother's apparent triumph, and that they had carried through successfully a very complicated intrigue. How far the opening-up of negotiations by the Sinites was connected with their aggression on the frontier—whether the two events were entirely independent of one another, or whether they were related as cause and effect—it was impossible to determine, but on the whole it seemed probable that the destruction of the two Pahari cities had been in the nature of a gentle hint to agree with the enemy quickly. One thing was certain, that the troops at Khush Urda, who were supposed to defend the eastern frontier, must have been instructed to further the progress of the Sinite envoys and their caravan, perhaps even to escort them across the desert.

There was plenty of time for exchanging surmises and discovering fresh light on difficult points, for no one came near the Elchi Khana either for good or bad, and Sir Robert forbade any one to go out. In the anomalous position to which he was reduced, as an ambassador who had not merely outstayed his welcome but had been practically disowned by his own government, he had no status to justify him even in calling

upon the new comers, much less in asking the Khan for an explanation of their presence. All that could be done was to lie low and refrain from provocation of any kind, while putting the place upon a war footing. The walls had already been looked to, weak points strengthened and possible means of access removed, and to-day a systematic patrol of the whole premises was instituted, volunteers being called for from among the servants and the refugee Hindus to supplement the efforts of the Trackers. Whether it was due to a dislike of military duty or to fear of what it might portend, a distinct diminution in the number of the Hindus was discovered when the roll was called at sunset. It was disquieting that the missing ones had managed to abscond unnoticed, though their presence was not particularly to be desired, and when it appeared that they had climbed to the roof of one of the stables adjoining the wall, and let themselves down into the lane outside, orders were at once issued for the demolition of the building, as well as of others similarly situated.

Probably the remaining Hindus wished that night that they had followed the example of their brethren, for something in the nature of an actual attack was attempted at one of the corners of the enclosure, where native houses came up fairly close on the outside and afforded cover. A shouting crowd, with lights and weapons, ran out suddenly, and proceeded to affix ladders to the wall, but were dispersed by the guard, hurriedly summoned by the sentry, without firing a shot against them. The Trackers were desperately anxious to pursue the retreating foe, but Sir Robert refused permission. It was as natural for an enemy to wish to dislodge the Mission from the Elchi Khana as it was all-important for them to retain it, for what could they do without shelter, scattered in the streets? With the same thought in his mind, he did not even send to the Khan in the morning to complain of the outrage, for the reply might only too probably be the offer of a safer refuge which would not be safe at all. However, if the Elchi was heedless of the proprieties

to be observed in such a case, the Khan was not, for after waiting in vain for an invitation to take a hand, he—or Aga Mohammed acting in his name—decided to move. A company of the Guard, numbering nominally a hundred men, marched down to the Elchi Khana in the afternoon, and the Yuzbashi in command desired an interview with the Elchi Beg. He was displeased that his whole command was not admitted with him, but consented at last to go in alone. He brought a gracious message in the Khan's name, regretting what had happened in the night, and sending a body of his own most trustworthy soldiers to garrison the Mission quarters for the future. The trap was so palpable that Sir Robert could have laughed, but he maintained his gravity as he assured the officer that his own force was amply sufficient for defence, and would, in fact, be uncomfortably crowded if such an addition was made to its numbers. The Yuzbashi was obviously taken aback by the effrontery of the reply, and suggested that he should be allowed to go through the place to try and find room for his men. This was politely refused, on the ground that the congestion within the walls was so great that a stranger's eyes must not be shocked by the sight of such disorder, and he was conducted to the door again after partaking of tea and biscuits. When he had departed with his men, a higher official, a Pansat or Major, arrived with more soldiers and an affecting tale of the Khan's grief and anxiety for the safety of the Mission, which was robbing him of his sleep, and could only be allayed by their accepting the offered guard. The reply was a grateful acknowledgment and the advice to sleep well, for the Mission had never been safer in their lives, and the discomfited officer retired to post his men round the walls on the outside.

The Elchi Khana was now besieged, in fact if not in name, but the appearance of peace was still kept up—even to the posting of the Sepoy sentry outside the gateway in the daytime. Sir Robert had been considerably exercised as to the wisdom of withdrawing

him, and keeping watch solely from the windows and roof, but decided against it, because while he remained at his post there was always the possibility of receiving communications from the Dadkhwah. A ball of mud tossed in anywhere at the back of the place might fall into the garden and never be found, but thrown at the sentry it was bound to attract his attention. As if to mark Sir Robert's prevision, on the second evening the sentry brought in with him at sunset a missive which had been revealed by the smashing of a clod of dry earth on the side of the door. But it was not from the Dadkhwah, though doubtless forwarded by him. The paper was European, and had been folded up very small; the words on it were in English:—

"Straining every nerve, but Government still impossible. Hold on; will rouse country yet. M. sends love.

H. GERRARD.

CAMBERHURST, Dec. 21st."

"The twenty-first of December! Then if they do do anything now, it will be too late," said Sir Robert to Arthur, who was with him when he smoothed out and read the discoloured paper. "If we were to be relieved, the force should at any rate have been under orders by then to return to Raiyati."

"Camberhurst?" said Arthur. "I thought perhaps the Guv'nor would have come out."

"To India? Certainly not. He knows he can do far more at home. But he has probably sent out a dozen or two of messages like this, to be despatched in all sorts of ways, in the hope that one may reach us. I wonder why your aunt didn't write a word or two. I should have liked to see her hand once more."

"Perhaps she wrote some and he wrote the others," suggested Arthur dutifully. "I say, uncle—" he broke off suddenly—"you think it's all up, then?"

"Humanly speaking, absolutely. I was convinced of it before, but there was just the chance that the Government might have repented, and decided merely



to give us a good fright instead of abandoning us altogether. Now, even if they do, it will be too late. Well, my boy, you have looked death in the face before, and so have I. Just once more—eh?”

“It’s so slow—such an awful lot of thinking about it,” burst from Arthur. “A thing that comes quick and is done with——”

“Yes, I know. Much simpler, ain’t it? But that’s not our business. It’s our own row we have to hoe, not anybody else’s. Precious easy for me to talk like this, you think, don’t you? all my life behind me, and yours only begun. But I little thought I was letting you in for this——”

“It’s not that, sir; never think it! I am proud to be with you—glad to have come. And you needn’t think that—what you said—about my missing anything. There never would have been anything more of that sort—never could have been. So it’s all right.”

“My dear Arthur! What, never?” Even at such a moment this tremendous renunciation could not but stir a kind of echo of amusement in Sir Robert, but he repressed it manfully. “It’s the circumstances that are the bother, not the fact,” he went on, with studied vagueness. “One doesn’t mind dying for the honour of England, but one does mind dying to her disgrace, just to enable a set of Ministers to shirk their duty comfortably. But after all, that’s not our business either, is it? Our business is the fact, and in that way we can do as much for England as if we were dying to help her keep her word, instead of break it.”

“Are the others to know—about the message, sir?”

“Why not? They know that a message came, and they have a right to hear what it was. By all means you can tell them if you like.”

Arthur had no particular desire to do it, but each of the other men, on meeting him, asked him naturally what the news was, and commented on the irony of the fact that a message intended to be one of encouragement should prove rather one of doom. It

had arrived either too soon or too late, this crumpled piece of paper which had somehow come into the Dadkhwah's hands—the only one of Colonel Gerrard's missives to reach its destination. It is possible that even to-day, when Pahar is no more than a name, some of them are still passing from hand to hand in Central Asia, treasured by pious Moslems lest their unknown characters should conceal the name of God, or sewn up carefully in silk as talismans of price, but none came into Sir Robert's possession save this. Harmar remarked cheerfully that he had known from the day he entered the Elchi Khana that something beastly was bound to happen there, so he was not disappointed; and the Doctor said that if things were really as bad as all that, it was time he began to get his notes on the diseases characteristic of Khamish into shape, since it didn't seem likely he would have much more opportunity of observation. They were so resolutely determined to remain unmoved that Arthur was conscious of something like resentment. He could not for his life have said anything appropriate himself on the situation, but he would have liked to hear some one else say it, and behold! they were as resolved as he was to pretend that everything was just as usual. Yet, though he had a premonition that if any one let himself go on the subject it would be Grandier, he felt a certain reluctance to tell him the news, for there had been a decided constraint between them since Colonel Brown's return. But having told him, it would have been inconsistent with their old habits of friendliness not to sit down and grouse over the message together—which meant, by all custom, that Grandier did the talking and his friend sympathized. His sympathy afforded Grandier the safety-valve which the most popular and successful of men needs in private if he is to remain popular and successful, and it was as necessary at this time as at any other.

"It's the beastly unfairness of it I can't stand," he declared vigorously, pausing in his tramp up and

down the verandah. "What business have they to send us up here to do their job for them, and then desert us? It's nothing but murder, but I suppose no one will see the truth of it but ourselves—and our people."

"Yes, I knew you would feel that was the worst part of the whole business—that she will be left quite alone, without even old Brown to look after her."

Grandier stopped again, and regarded him with distinct hostility. "I don't know why you bring her into it," he said. "I'm not such a fool as to flatter myself that she'll be in any danger of breaking her heart when she hears."

"Er—of course not," said Arthur, rather taken aback. "Now that everything's all right between you, it makes a tremendous difference. If you had gone on not knowing how things stood——" he paused because he really did not know what to say. He seemed to have blundered on dangerous ground, but how or why he could not see.

"But things aren't all right, I tell you!" cried Grandier angrily. "She don't really know her own mind a bit more than she did. It would have been all right when we met, I'm convinced, but we shan't meet."

"Oh, but then that *will* be all right, surely? Because if she doesn't care for you, there's always a chance that she may meet some one else she can care for, and be quite happy after all." If Arthur had thought, he would hardly have offered his consolation in so questionable a shape, but his mind was busy trying to reconcile what he now heard with what Grandier had told him before. He was just assuring himself that on that former occasion his friend had very naturally been feeling cheerful, whereas now he was as inevitably in the lowest of low spirits, when he became aware that he was in imminent danger of personal assault. Grandier was standing over him with clenched fists.

"Stand up, can't you? How I have managed to



"How can I keep my hands off you !



keep my hands off you so long I don't know." It is difficult to assume a heroic attitude in a long-chair, and Arthur vacated his with some speed. But disregarding the other's threatening aspect, he leaned with folded arms on the back.

"Steady, old man! What's up? If I've said anything wrong I'll apologize with pleasure. But what was it? I'm sure I didn't mean——"

"It's not what you say," burst from Grandier. "It is what you *are*—the impudence of your whole attitude. What d'ye mean by always setting yourself up as her champion—pretending that I don't consider her and so you've got to?"

"I never dreamed of such a thing," protested Arthur truthfully. "As for considering her—why, of course one has to. Isn't it a man's business to consider every woman in every way he can? You're not going to deny that? But as for saying that I cast reflections on you——"

"That's exactly what you do do, and arrant cheek it is. Always hinting that you can read her better than I can—get at her soul, I suppose——" with terrific contempt.

"Oh, keep your hair on!" said Arthur, in resigned despair. "As if I should ever have had the cheek to talk to her about her soul!"

"You have cheek enough for anything. You know very well you're as proud as Punch because you think she talks to you about things she won't talk of to me, that you have got deeper into her mind than I have. I saw it in your face that night you let out——"

"I suppose you imagine you can say anything you like to me because I was idiotic enough to let you know what a fool I was," said Arthur, stung to the quick. "Look here; try and have a grain of sense, can't you? You'll say next that I've talked to her against you, when I swear to you I have defended you through thick and thin."

"And who asked you to defend me, pray? and why in the world should it be necessary to defend me

against her? A nice friend you are! I'll tell you why there was all this disloyal talk and plotting between you—no, you needn't pretend to flare up; it was disloyal, and it was plotting. It was just that I wouldn't give in to all her nonsense, so because I refuse to indulge her in it she turns to you, and you—as usual—think of nothing but giving her any blessed thing she chooses to cry for. It doesn't occur to you that I'm trying to make her a bit more like other people——”

“Well, I should call that cheek—to try and make any one more like any one else,” said Arthur deliberately. “Isn't it enough for you that she's herself?”

“Oh, you make me sick! Well, I hope you're satisfied. You have come between her and me, which is presumably what you wanted, and then you coolly suggest that it's all for the best because she can console herself quicker with somebody else. And yet I suppose you would say calmly that it was all done for her good and mine.”

“You know very well that I have not come between her and you. I am the only one to suffer, and I deserved it for being a fool. My last words to her were to say how glad I was it was all right between you, and I meant it. If there was the chance now for one of us to be saved, I'd make you take it—for her sake, mind you, not for yours. She does you the honour of caring for you—perhaps not to the full extent you're pleased to demand, but still she does—and since she wants you, she shall have you, if I can manage it. But she has done me the honour of making a friend of me, and I shall remember it to my dying moment. I see now why she talked to me as she did, but it doesn't make it any better for you—only worse. You had snubbed her, on your own confession. Proud of it, aren't you?”

“Look here,” expostulated Grandier; “I don't know what you mean by talking to me like this——”

“Well, I think I have the right to, after what you have said to me. Besides, there's always the chance it

may be some good to her. You *may* get saved somehow, you may get through and meet her again and marry her, but I don't think you'll go on with the snubbing plan. You won't bother about trying to make her more like other people, but just be jolly thankful she is herself and belongs to you—or you're not the man I take you for."

Grandier looked at him with stupefaction. The turning of a worm is apt to be a stunning fact to the other party to the transaction. "And if you get saved and I don't?" was the best retort he could think of.

"That won't happen, you may be sure. Time for me to relieve old Brown, I think," and Arthur took up his sword, felt for his revolver-holster, and went out.

"I'll cut the ground under your feet if it does, my young friend!" murmured Grandier, as the short, broad-shouldered figure disappeared into the darkness. "I don't exactly see you as the fortunate person she meets and *can* care for. She doesn't care a scrap for me—what's the good of keeping up the pretence now?—but she would own that I treated her decently once I 'understood,' and my wishes ought to have some weight with her. A letter from the dead—ah, it's a solemn matter! Nothing threatening or alarming, of course—no nonsense about coming back to haunt her if she married him. As the high-minded Gerrard would say—terrorising women isn't cricket. Besides, old Travy herself would be up in arms at the idea of a Christian girl's giving in to such a bogey, and would stir her up to defy it. A restrained, earnest request, with a touch of irrepressible feeling here and there, and just a hint at his dirty behaviour. I swear I would never have given him credit for having so much spirit. Jolly good job for him to find out at once that sort of thing don't pay. For it won't. She hasn't a notion he cares for her, and she doesn't care for him——" a sudden pause, for conscience recalled that desperate look of panic in Noel's eyes. "Nonsense! it mayn't



have been that at all—or it may be Harmar or the Doctor. At any rate, she won't have him when she has once read my letter. Some fellows would say it would make her all the more absolutely determined to get him, but that's because they don't know how nice girls feel on nice questions. So here goes! He may be saved and I may not, but it won't do him any good."

It must have been with something of the feeling of the hero who realises that he has just made a regrettable exhibition of himself before his valet that Grandier sat down to write his letter. The hero's feelings are not likely to be particularly cordial towards the valet, and his were not towards Arthur. It might have been supposed a difficult letter to write, but words flowed to his pen. He was a man with a grievance—against Noel, against Arthur, against circumstances—and the resolution was strong within him not to suffer alone. Even if Arthur and he were both killed, the letter might somehow come to Noel's hands, and teach her something of the pain she had inflicted on others. This was not how he put it to himself, naturally. His way of saying it was that the girl had absolutely no heart, and it would do her good to make her realise what she had done in playing with the affection a man had laid at her feet. It might even teach her to behave better to other people in future—in fact, in satisfying his personal grudge, Grandier felt himself a benefactor to society. He read the letter over when he had written it, with a certain artistic pleasure in the bitterness of its reproaches, put it into two strong envelopes, one inside the other, and addressed it to her very carefully in English, Turki and Hindustani. He had not yet decided whether he would try any way of getting it to her, or merely leave it among his papers, but it was ready in case any chance offered.

The blackness of the night seemed all the blacker in contrast with the candle-light in his room as he went out to relieve Harmar in the charge of the gate. For

purposes of defence the Elchi Khan fell naturally into two wards—the entrance courtyards with the buildings surrounding them, and the garden, with Sir Robert's house and the various summer-houses perched upon the wall. Dr Lakeney had taken possession of one of these summer-houses, which was important enough to be called a pavilion, as his hospital and dispensary, and the Hindus for whom there was no room in the buildings were in *yurtes* in the garden, but otherwise it might be said that the defenders generally were massed in the gate ward. Not that the garden half of the place was neglected, however, for it was constantly patrolled, and there were sentries all round the walls, the precious spring of water in Sir Robert's courtyard making it even more valuable to the defence than the buildings which housed the servants and the escort. One or two small doors which pierced the garden wall had been boarded across and strongly built up from the inside.

It was at one of these doors, close to the hospital, that Grandier, on his way to the gate, found the Doctor and a sentry standing, much perturbed. There was a man outside who wanted to come in, they told Grandier. He had made known his presence by throwing stones and clods of earth in at the wide window-spaces of the dispensary above, but durst not shout, lest the Pansat and the guards, keeping watch outside along the front of the Elchi Khana, should hear him. He was evidently in deadly fear of being discovered, and the Doctor thought he must be a messenger of some sort, but how was he to be admitted? The built-up door could not be opened in a hurry, and he could not go round to the front. Grandier laughed at their difficulty, and sent the dispensary assistant to fetch four or five Sepoys with ropes. They could not show a light, but the man seemed to understand what was required of him, and adjusted the rope round his body. They pulled him up as silently as possible, and helped him over the top of the wall, two men standing by with fixed

## 276 England hath Need of Thee

bayonets, in case of treachery. But it was neither a spy nor a messenger who followed them into the radius of the hospital lights. It was Ismail Beg, wearing a common felt kaftan and hat instead of his resplendent uniform.

"I have come that we may die together," he said.

## CHAPTER XXII.

## THE HAZARD OF THE LOT.

CONDUCTED immediately to Sir Robert's presence, Ismail Beg gave briefly and bitterly his account of the even's which had brought him back to Khamish. Encamped with his army on the Yeshil Su, he had been pushing out reconnaissances on the opposite bank to ascertain the position and strength of the Sinite forces. That there was a very large army opposed to him was speedily evident, but its commander showed no disposition to allow himself to be drawn into fighting before his own time. Ismail Beg thereupon planned a reconnaissance in force, intended to test the foe's mettle, but during the day before that on which it was to take place he had received an urgent message from his father. The Khan wrote that his son must return secretly to the capital at once, as treachery was at work, and if he did not come Pahar would be irrecoverably lost. Communicating his intention to one or two of his nearest subordinates, and promising to return at the earliest possible moment, the young man obeyed the summons, only to find himself arrested even before reaching the gates of Khamish. His father was in a comatose condition, absolutely unable to transact business of any kind, his brother Aga Mohammed had emerged from his imprisonment and possessed himself of power, and it was the common talk of the palace that the Sinite envoys were in the city to receive its surrender.

Ismail Beg at the head of the army might have proved a formidable obstacle to this diplomatic arrangement—hence the ingenious plan adopted to separate him from it. A very brief imprisonment had shown him that his life was in imminent peril, and warned by one of his gaolers, he had tasted neither food nor drink. When darkness came on, he changed clothes with a faithful servant, his foster-brother, who had been captured with him, and the compassionate gaoler looked the other way while he slipped out of the palace into a back street, whence he made his way to the Elchi Khana.

Sir Robert shook his head when he heard the tale. It was not that he grudged the shelter of the Elchi Khana to the unfortunate youth, but Ismail Beg without the army was merely an additional source of danger to himself and every one else. In all probability Aga Mohammed Beg's emissaries were now at work assuring the troops that their leader had sold them to the Sinites, with the result that they also would turn their wrath against him and his English allies.

"If we could induce the Dadkhwah to help you out of the city, would you try to return to the army and make known the truth to them?" asked the Envoy of his guest.

"Alas, sahib! Niaz Beg knows only too well that his own head is at stake. He will not endanger it for the sake of one who could never repay the debt."

"If I were in your place, I am inclined to think I should take the risk," said Sir Robert, with some impatience. "Do you really mean to give up everything without another try?"

"Were you able to ride to the army with me, sahib, I would start this very night, but of what use for me to go alone? If I must die, I would rather die among my friends here than be murdered in some lonely place on the road."

"Oh, very well. It's for you to choose," said Sir Robert sharply. "I don't propose to turn you out, but for your own sake and ours you had better become

Sabir Akhund again, and not advertise your presence here unnecessarily."

"To serve you once more is the height of my desire, sahib," and Ismail Beg saluted and went out. Sir Robert muttered irritably as he went. Of course it would have been a desperate attempt, but as he said, in the youngster's place he would have made it. Even now he was conscious of a keen desire to take the hopeless chance himself. But to divide the party was not to be thought of, and how could they all, with the servants and the wretched Hindu refugees, make their way through the narrow streets and out at the gate? And even supposing by a miracle they got thus far, what could they do on the open plain against the guards and the tribesmen, since a secret evasion was impossible? No, the thing was out of the question, yet the inborn adventurer in Robert Charteris chafed against the conclusion.

Whether Ismail Beg's admission to the Elchi Khana had been observed or not, certain it is that three nights later two men stood under the wall at the built-up gate and sought admission. Cross-examined by Harmar from the dispensary window as to their object, one of them confessed that he was the Dadkhwah, and begged that he and his servant might see the Elchi Beg on most important business. Sir Robert gave leave for them to be admitted, and they were hauled up as Ismail Beg had been,—Harmar suggested that in future it would be well to rig up a windlass on the wall, with an arm-chair comfortably suspended from the rope, for the convenience of visitors. The "servant" stuck very close to the Dadkhwah in his progress across the garden, and it did not surprise the watchers to note under his kaftan the thick-soled shoes characteristic of the Sinite. Arrived in Sir Robert's room, the Dadkhwah threw off all disguise, and introduced his companion as one of the Sinite commissioners charged with taking over Pahar. Having done this, the old man retired into his shell, evidently heartily ashamed of the errand

he was on, and sat hunched up in a corner, refusing even to interpret, so that the Argoon interpreter had to be summoned. There was a brief interlude of politeness—complimentary enquiries as to “honourable health” and “honourable age” drawing forth the proper replies respecting “miserable bodily weakness” and “contemptibly few years”—but it was very brief. The Sinite came to the point with a haste which showed both that he was really anxious to do business and that he considered the Mission in his power.

“We have no quarrel with the government of the Empress,” he announced. “Let there be peace between us here as elsewhere. But your presence here was not asked for, and is in the highest degree displeasing.”

“Pardon me; it was asked for by the Khan, who is the only authority we acknowledge in Pahar,” said Sir Robert.

“Pahar is ours; the Khan is nothing,” was the contemptuous reply. “Not for the first time has a province revolted from its allegiance and returned to it. By rights you are all deserving of death, since you come here to encourage rebels in their rebellion, and death would be your fate were we not mercifully inclined.”

“The mercy of the Sinites is a proverb throughout all surrounding countries,” said Sir Robert smoothly.

“As it should be. Were we to hold our hand, you have nothing but death to look for. The foolish people here choose to blame you for what has happened, and we know well you are sheltering the son of the Khan, who, as all the army are aware, has betrayed them into our hands. Therefore, without our protection, you die.”

“Others also may die,” hinted Sir Robert gently.

“That matters not to us. You may kill as many barbarians as you please, and save us the trouble. The rebels have not yet been punished for their rebellion. But because it is believed in heavenly quarters”—presumably this referred to the Sinite

capital—"that you could do good service in subduing Pahar and rendering it more profitable to the heavenly government, the offer is made you of entering our service. You shall be Amban of Pahar, with power of life and death. A fixed tribute will be due from you, such as will keep these people so busy labouring to raise it that they will have no time to think of rebelling again, and whatever else you can gather from the country will be your own. Your young men can serve under you. If they do not choose to marry women of this country we will obtain them wives from Europe. Others of your nation have taken service with us before, and profited both themselves and us."

"You, if you like—hardly themselves!" was Sir Robert's thought, but he merely said, "Acceptance of your offer is out of the question. Her Majesty's Government have a strong objection to Sinim as a neighbour, and would certainly refuse their permission."

"Why keep up this farce? Do you think we cannot see the truth? Your Government sent you here to bolster up the rebellion of the Paharis with false promises because it was minded both to destroy Pahar and to rid itself of you. Not one of the hopes you held out has been fulfilled, not one movement made in your support. You owe nothing to your country, and need make no pretence of consulting it."

"Even though all you say were true, it would still be impossible to accept your offer," said Sir Robert; "but I deny it absolutely."

"You are old, and should be wiser than to refuse to see what is perfectly clear to all. Yet your young men may be less foolish, for in the young the love of life is strong. Call them, and tell them what I have offered you."

"I will do nothing of the kind. There is no choice to lay before them. I have given you your answer. The audience is ended." He stood up. "I did not expect Niaz Beg to take part in insulting those he



has called his friends, even if he could not help them," he added in Turki.

The Dadkhwah bowed his head. "Yet some men would prefer to hear of a way of escape, though it were without honour," he said apologetically.

"Where there is no honour, there is no way of escape," said Sir Robert.

"You say well," said the Sinite, who had been listening greedily, though he spoke in his own language. "There is no way of escape—neither for you, nor your young men, nor for him you call Istākis Beg, who brought you here with lies to your destruction, nor for any within these walls. The people of Khamish will see to that—and then the people of Khamish may look to themselves!" he added, so low that the interpreter barely heard.

"Let your Excellency beware," said Sir Robert to the Dadkhwah, as he conducted his visitors back to the wall. "Those who hire murderers have been known to help bring them to justice afterwards."

"True, Excellency," was the miserable reply. "Yet a murderer may escape justice, while there is no escape from the sword's point that drives him to do murder. Our rulers are fascinated as by a serpent, believing the throne established for the future—and it is by the favour of those who have never yet observed an oath or kept a promise!"

"Is there no hope of rousing the people even now?" Sir Robert asked rapidly in Turki, hoping the Sinite could not follow.

"None, Excellency. Their minds are poisoned, for they truly believe that the coming of the Sinites is due to you. But for your coming—brought about for his own purposes by Istākis Beg—they say Sinim would have left Pahar alone, or had you come in sufficient strength, no one would have cared to disturb you, but you brought words alone to fight with, and not only we pay the penalty, but yourselves also."

There seemed no more to be said. The Dadkhwah was clearly as unhappy and ashamed as the Sinite

was determined and confident, and he had no consolation to offer his former friends. But when both the visitors had been lowered over the wall, Harmar picked up a small piece of paper where the old man had been standing. It bore these words in Turki:—

“There is a rumour that British troops are again on their way to Raiyati.”

“Too late, as usual!” said Sir Robert, when he read it. “To do the slightest good, they should have been there a month ago, ready to cross the passes the moment they were open.”

“But they may be there now, sir!” suggested Grandier eagerly.

“Quite true. Oh, I was not proposing to ignore them haughtily because they were a little late in starting. Ask for volunteers among the servants, Grandier—we can’t spare any of the Trackers—to carry secret messages, and we will try to get in touch with the relieving force.”

Six men were speedily forthcoming, of whom Sir Robert chose four, and they were provided with messages written on very thin paper and rolled up in quills. The resources of the whole party were mobilised to enable each man to disguise himself in the way he thought most likely to ensure success, and they were all lowered from different points on the wall the same night, because if they had started at different times and the first been captured, watch would immediately have been set for the others. Then there was another weary time of waiting, broken only by abortive attacks—scarcely to be called attacks; demonstrations would be a better word—on various parts of the walls, perhaps to keep the besieged garrison from feeling too comfortable. The flower-buds on the fruit-trees in the garden were bursting now; in a few days the whole place would be under a veil of blossom. Nowhere in the world—not even in the Arctic Regions—is spring so welcome as after the long summer and longer winter of Central Asia, and nowhere so completely springlike, changing deso-

lation into flower-strewn greenness in a day. It brought a delusive hint of freedom, too, for it opened the passes as well as the flower-buds, and who could doubt that when the Mission's desperate straits were brought home to British hearts beyond the mountains, herculean efforts would be made to rescue them in time?

"Somehow you can't believe in being killed in weather like this!" said Arthur, critically inspecting an apricot-tree that grew close to the verandah, as he mounted the steps. "Look here! this fellow will be out to-morrow."

Grandier grunted, not even taking the trouble to say he supposed Arthur meant the association of violent death with spring-time was incongruous, as he would have done once, and Arthur went on to his room, where he paused suddenly, struck by the sight of a piece of paper on his table. It was written in Turki, which he could not read easily, but enough of the meaning was decipherable to make him take it at once to Sir Robert. It was another offer of terms, this time addressed to the younger members of the party. Apparently the writer thought that the Envoy might not have told his subordinates of the offer made them—though he had done so the same night—and was renewing it with greater definiteness than before.

"They must be awfully keen on getting us," said Arthur.

"They may well be. If we, who presumably represent British interests here, not only surrender those interests without a struggle, but take service with Sinim ourselves, it puts them in a very strong position if a British expedition arrives. This makes it pretty certain there is one on its way."

"But why bother about us at all, sir? Why not just let us be rescued and go away?"

"They can't afford it. We know too much of the treachery with which the whole thing has been worked. Besides, they will never believe that if a

British expedition reaches Khamish it will go away again. Their only hope is to stop it at the frontier, and they would rather do it by absorbing us than by wiping us out, for fear of reprisals."

"But you think that too, sir, don't you?—that if an expedition is on the way it will mean that we annex Pahar?"

"Ordinarily I should think so, but now I doubt it. I believe this Government is capable of coming here and going away again. No doubt we are hardly in a position to realise the nobility of the idea, and most certainly we can't expect anybody else to believe it. But where did you say you found this paper, Arthur?"

"On my table, sir—just where I should see it."

"But who put it there? Doesn't it occur to you that one of our men must be in communication with the enemy?"

Arthur jumped. "No, sir, I hadn't thought of it. I thought it might be the interpreter, because he's always had a sort of liking for me—because of helping him with his English and that kind of thing, you know."

"Very likely. No doubt he felt he was doing you a kindness, but we can't have kindnesses of that sort. Do you realise he is trying to tempt you to desert? What if he is working upon the men as well? Take two Sepoys and fetch him here."

But when Arthur, much astonished by the turn of events, arrived at the interpreter's quarters, they were empty. Whether the Argoon had seen him coming and prudently made himself scarce, or had already decamped, leaving the Sinite offer as a legacy of gratitude to his English teacher, did not appear; but gone he was, and the most exhaustive search of the place failed to reveal him, so that it was clear he had managed in some way to pass the walls. Some method of doing this there must have been, for in the three weeks that followed, the numbers of the Hindûs continued to diminish perceptibly, though by what means could not be discovered. It might have

been stopped by gathering them all into one of the courtyards and mounting sentries over them, but Sir Robert shrugged his shoulders and said, "Let 'em go! Poor wretches, why should they stick to us and get killed if they think they can save their lives outside? So many fewer mouths to feed!"

"But we stayed here because of them when we might have escaped, sir!" objected Arthur.

"That kind of moral obligation don't weigh very heavy, you'll find as you get older. The Trackers will be faithful, of course—anything else is unimaginable—and I am much mistaken if any of our servants try to desert, but these poor wretches, bandied about as pawns in a game they don't understand—hanged if I understand it either!—how can we be surprised if they save their skins while they can? It's not as if any of us were living on the fat of the land."

There was no actual scarcity, but the food was strictly limited in quantity, and by no means tempting. Luxuries had ceased since Mr Madhuji's emporium was placed out of bounds by the blockade, and the meals consisted chiefly of *chapatis* of roughly ground meal, varied by such meat as the slaughter at intervals of one of the baggage-animals afforded. Later on, if the siege lasted long enough, the garrison might hope to enjoy their own fruit, but at present the garden was a sea of pink-and-white blossom, as exquisite as it was exasperating to those who hungered for a little variety in their daily food. Still the monotonous round went on, in the pleasant spring weather as in the bitter winter—drill, guard-mounting, inspections, serving out food, polo, beating off spasmodic attacks—and no word came to show that England had not forgotten this far-away outpost.

As often happens, when the monotony was interrupted at last, it was once and for all. One day an unwonted display in the street attracted the attention of the besieged. Besides the usual guard, which was supposed to be for their protection, there was another

body of troops drawn up opposite the gateway. With them were the Khan's head chamberlain and two or three other court officials, one of whom Ismail Beg pointed out as the chief executioner. When the guards had withdrawn on either side, leaving an open space in front of the gate, the head chamberlain advanced and called loudly for the Elchi Beg. Sir Robert would have gone out to meet him, but the remonstrances of the rest, and the exceeding probability of treachery, induced him to be content with showing himself at the small barred window of the armoury, which commanded the entrance.

"You bring a message from his Highness?" he asked.

"The heart of Hasrat is torn," replied the official. "He learns that here, in the dwelling provided by him for his friend the Elchi Beg, to which he has daily sent his own guards, that it may be protected from all harm, is sheltered one of his own house—a son who is no son. Therefore he summons the Elchi Beg, as he values Hasrat's friendship, to surrender that rebel and traitor to the fate he deserves."

The mask was off with a vengeance. There was no alternative between refusal and a despicable compliance. Surrender was not even to be glossed over with a veil of propriety. For the very reason that the choice was so clear, there was no choice.

"I shelter no traitors here," said Sir Robert; "but his Highness's son is safe in this house as long as we are."

"Let the Elchi Beg beware," returned the chamberlain. "It cannot be expected that Hasrat should continue his protection to one who openly defies him."

"That is for his Highness to decide. If he withdraws his protection we must endeavour to do without it."

"Let your Excellency think once again. If you persist in this attitude, and the guard is taken away, Hasrat has no responsibility for any ill that befalls you."

## 188 England hath Need of Thee

"That I quite understand. I refuse to give up Ismail Beg. There is leave to depart."

"It is Hasrat's order that the guard departs with me," and the official beckoned to the Pansat, whose troops fell in behind the others, and the open space was soon left empty. Sir Robert turned round, to find Ismail Beg behind him.

"Sahib, I am in your hands. Had you bidden me go out to them, I would have gone," said the young man.

"I know. But it would have been no good. They would only have demanded some one else next. They knew we should refuse, and counted on it."

"I rather wonder they didn't leave the guard, if they mean to attack us to-night," said Grandier. "They would have been so handy for a rush."

"No doubt they will be present, but not officially. We are under the 'save face' rule now, you must remember. It will be the mob—or at most Ismail Beg's disbanded soldiers, furious at his treachery—who will do the deed. Well, we'll give 'em a run for their money. Plenty of fight in us yet—eh?"

"Rather, sir!" came in chorus, and once more the round of the defences was made, and the garrison inspected, to make sure that every one knew his post, and that the reserve was stationed in the precise spot whence succour could most speedily be sent to any threatened point. But no attack was made that night, perhaps because it was guessed that the besieged would be specially on the alert, perhaps for another reason. About half-past ten Grandier, who was in command of the gateway ward, came to Sir Robert with a face that showed pale under its tan. Behind him one of his men bore something shrouded in a cloth.

"Head thrown over the wall, sir," he said, and as Sir Robert came to the door, the man unfolded the cloth on the verandah floor, and revealed its horrible contents. It was not at first that their full horror could be realised, but when Sir Robert brought the lamp by which he had been reading, he saw what made even his iron hand tremble. The lips of the

severed head were sewn together with rusty wire, as were the eyelids of each eye, while about the ears and nostrils were splashes of some bright metallic substance.

"Good heavens! molten lead!" Sir Robert set down the lamp hastily. He had seen many battle-fields, but none of the awful sights there witnessed had affected him as did this poor dishonoured relic. "Well, thank God! that must have finished him quickly. Who is it—Abdul Karim? Cover it up, cover it up!"

"This was stuck behind the ear, sir." Grandier produced a quill—empty. Sir Robert examined it in vain. One quill is very like another.

"There's no telling whether this is one of our own quills, or whether he was bringing a return message. But everything depends on that," he said.

"He would hardly have hung about here for three weeks, sir," suggested Grandier. "Surely it's more likely that he has been sent back to bring us news?"

"More likely, and yet he may have failed, and been coming back to tell us so. And now we shall never know which it is."

The others were gathering round, attracted by the light on the verandah. Colonel Brown was the first to speak. "Well, it's pretty clearly to me," he said. "The relief expedition is on its way at last."

"It should have been here by now, if it was to do any good," said Sir Robert sharply. "If it had started in time it could have been."

"The question is whether it can get here at all. It has just struck me that it may be wandering about in the sands unable to find Khamish. D'ye remember that all the way-marks were removed to puzzle the Sinites?"

"But they have compasses!" protested Sir Robert. The idea was stupefying.

"You try to guide an army across these sands, with the sky hidden by the dust in the air, and all landmarks destroyed, and see how you get on—in



a country you don't know, and have no reliable maps of. It can be done, of course—I can do it. And I rather think that points to my doing it.”

“Quite so, if you were at the frontier instead of shut up here,” said Sir Robert.

“No, from this side. I must get out and find them.”

“But it's madness, man! You don't know where to look for them, or how far off they are, or even whether they are there at all! And the people here do know probably by this time, and will be looking out for a messenger from us.”

“No doubt. But if I don't go, it means that not only will every soul in the Elchi Khana be wiped out, but the expedition as well. What will they do for water once they get lost in the sands? There's one chance in a thousand for us all if I go, none at all if I don't.”

“But they must have our other messengers to guide them!” cried Sir Robert. “They would never have let poor Abdul Karim come on alone if he had been their only guide.”

“Then why are they not here? Why are we not attacked to-night, as we should be if the people knew they were close at hand? I believe Abdul Karim was sent on to warn us to make a demonstration of some kind on a certain day. Then he was to go back and bring them in. But when he don't come they will have to start by themselves. And if they once miss the road they are done.”

“It's sending you to certain death——”

“Nonsense! you ain't sending me; I am going. And I want some one to go with me. I know where I mean to cross the city wall, and that will need a second man, and there are canals and ditches to cross without number.”

“Harmar must stay with his men, and the Doctor with his patients,” said Sir Robert slowly, looking at Grandier and Arthur.

“I'll go, sir!” they both cried eagerly.

“No, no!” said Arthur. “Let me go, sir. He

ought to take care of himself; he's engaged. He oughtn't to go."

"Excuse me," said Grandier deliberately. "It seems to me pretty much the same to go or stay."

"Yes, yes!" said Sir Robert, looking quickly from one to the other. "No one can say whether there is more danger here or there. The chance is the very slightest in either case. I won't take the responsibility of deciding. Think of your parents, Arthur. You must draw lots."

"Done!" said Colonel Brown, and picked up two straws from the verandah, dropped by nesting birds. He trimmed them carefully with his knife. "One of these is double the length of the other," he said. "Whoever gets the long one goes. I put them behind me and shuffle them. Grandier, you are senior. Right or left?"

"Right!" snapped Grandier, almost before the words had left the speaker's lips.

Colonel Brown held out the longer straw to Arthur. "You go," he said.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## ONE FIGHT MORE.

"I MUST just write to my people," said Arthur, as he and Grandier went up the steps to their own verandah. "Get out those Pahari togs for me, there's a good chap, while I do it."

Nearly a year ago, when Khamish was still friendly—how long ago those days seemed now!—all the members of the Mission had set themselves up with complete Pahari costumes, not without dreams of future fancy balls. Now, while Arthur wrote his letter, Grandier turned out the kaftans and girdles from the trunk where they had been stored, and a pointed felt hat from the helmet-case it had usurped. He also looked out his friend's revolver.

"Here, you'd better take mine," he said, as he tried the trigger. "You know this wretched thing of yours always misses fire once. It may mean your life if you only get five shots when you are counting on six."

"But I never do count on six, I'm so used to it. There! that's done with!" he directed an envelope conspicuously to his father, and stuck it down. "You'll see it's put in the cache for me, won't you?" A hiding-place had been contrived in the floor of Sir Robert's reception-room by prising up a stone and clearing out a space underneath. Here various important papers already reposed, and when the attack came the stone was to be fitted into place again, dust strewn into the cracks, and the rugs laid

down as usual over the spot. There was just a chance that it might escape the notice of plunderers.

"Yes, I'll put it in." Grandier took the envelope and balanced it in his hand. "But I'm going to ask you to take my letter for me. It's ready written. Here it is;" he held out the packet directed to Noel.

"Your letter?" said Arthur in astonishment. "Of course I'll take it if you like. But don't you want it to get to her?"

"Of all the idiotic things to say! Of course I want it to get to her. I suppose one feels somehow that you have a better chance of coming through than we have—shut up here like rats in a hole. No—" forestalling Arthur's eager protest—"I'm not going to exchange with you. I know it's all nonsense, and that you are just as likely to be wiped out as I am. But it's just to make things as sure as possible. If I get through the letter won't be necessary—and anyhow I can write another to put in the cache. So she'll get it anyhow."

"Of course I'll do anything to get it to her safely." Arthur unbuttoned his shirt and put the letter inside it. "But it seems a cracked sort of thing to risk it like this."

"But don't you see that if you get through and I don't, you'll be able to give it to her personally? That's what I want. Promise me to give it into her hands—don't send it by post or write to her about it beforehand—just go to her and give it her."

"All right; I promise—not that I think there's the smallest likelihood of my being able to do it. But even if I am caught, I don't suppose anybody will be able to read it, so it won't matter so much."

"It must just take its chance, I know that. But I know you'll get it to her if you can."

"Honour bright. Well, there doesn't seem much sense in packing up my things, does there? If I come back I shall want them, and if I don't, you'll have to sort them out. Take anything you like, of course—except my sword; let my mother have that. Oh, and

I say! I wish you'd let Miss Noel have Rajah. You can say he's a wedding present, you know."

"Rather a valuable one."

"What's that signify? She can't guess anything. It's not as if she knew. But she's awfully fond of him, and she would look so stunning riding him—— Look here, you can pretend you bought him from me, if you like, and that the present is from you. Only let her have him."

"Nonsense! as if I was going to take the credit! As you say, it's not as if she knew." Grandier assured himself comfortably that even if Noel's heart had wandered a tiny bit in Arthur's direction, at least she could have no idea of his feelings towards her—he was far too scrupulous a beggar ever to have let her see them—and he felt able to say heartily, "All right, old man! Of course she shall have the beast if you wish it. But I hope and expect you'll come back safe and sound, and then he won't be available."

"Oh, then I could give him to her myself. Now that I've thought of her riding him I can never feel that he's really mine again."

Grandier laughed—not very pleasantly. Somehow or other, everything that his friend said in all innocence seemed doomed to reflect upon his own attitude towards Noel. He was ashamed of the letter he had written, still more ashamed of the means he had taken for getting it delivered, but he had no intention of asking for it back. "You all ready?" he said. "Better call the Doctor, then."

Dr Lakeney was a high authority on amateur theatricals, and great in the art of make up. His business it was, by means of judicious touches of paint, to give Arthur's desperately English countenance as much as might be of a Tartar cast—so that the disguise might at any rate pass at a distance—and he performed his task deftly enough. While Arthur was getting ready, preparations had been making for the departure of the forlorn hope, by removing secretly the barricading from one of the built-up doors. Only

Harmar accompanied them thither, however, after the last hearty handshake had been exchanged, for it was intended to deceive the enemy in case spies were on the watch inside or outside the walls. Even Sir Robert, after his fervent "Good-bye, my boy! God bless you!" went with the rest to the dispensary pavilion, whence, after much parade of screened lights, two sowars were let down over the wall and drawn up again twice, with enough loud whispering and scraping against the bricks to attract the attention of everybody in the neighbourhood. Then the door by which the exit had really been made was quietly built up again, and the occupants of the Elchi Khana resigned themselves to wait. Few of them slept that night, for while those who knew of the attempt were painfully on the alert for any noise from the city that might show it had been discovered, all were expecting an attack. Some, moreover, had other business on hand, for when roll was called in the morning it was found that all the Hindus and one or two of the servants were missing. The rats had left the sinking ship. Apparently because they would now need it no longer, they had also left in evidence their means of escape, which was no other than the built-over channel by which the surplus water from the spring, after supplying tanks in the two outer courtyards, was conducted under the wall. The large quantity of water used since the place had been so full left the channel almost empty, so that it was possible for a human being to crawl through the culvert without being drowned or asphyxiated. That this had been the method adopted was clear from the fact that one of the *yurtes* occupied by the fugitives had been pitched directly over the underground channel, and a way down into it made under the shelter by removing the stones. Hitherto these must always have been replaced before daylight, but now, so it seemed, there had been no one in the secret left above ground to do it. Sir Robert treated the matter lightly.

"So much the better!" he said. "We shall not have their blood, at any rate, on our heads now."

A deathly stillness surrounded the Elchi Khana that day. It was not merely the absence of the guards, it was that no one appeared in the lanes near by, or even passed along the wider street in front. Distant noises there were—drummings and shoutings, with the occasional sound of a shot, but no one came near. Grandier and Harmar, consulting together, hit upon the idea that the neighbourhood might be sufficiently deserted to allow of a dash for the city gate. They laid the plan before Sir Robert, and he allowed them to ask for a volunteer who should go out and scout. To the surprise of all, the Caravanbashi, who had been an unparalleled nuisance during the siege owing to his objection to the utilisation of any of his animals for food, offered to go, and was permitted to do so, as his Mongolian features would make him less likely to be recognised than European or Indian. With extreme difficulty he made his way out through the culvert, which was supposed to empty itself on the bank of one of the city canals not far off. The besieged knew that he emerged safely, for he showed himself for a moment before he proceeded to reconnoitre cautiously in the direction of the gate, but after that he was seen no more. About noon his head was thrown over the walls by an unseen hand. It fell in the garden, so that it had apparently come from one of the native houses at the back, but the moment was dexterously chosen, when the two sentries on the beat had just passed one another, to throw it between them. No one suggested leaving the place after this, and lest it should occur to the enemy that where one had gone out others could come in, the roof of the culvert was broken down for a yard or two, and the channel filled up with stones, such as it was hardly possible to dislodge by working in the confined space underground.

Then the besieged settled down once more to waiting. Soldiers and servants took their meals and their noonday sleep as usual, because they had been awake all night, and there was that before them which

demanding every ounce of bodily strength if they were to do credit to their service. In the afternoon they all found occupation in cleaning and polishing once more the weapons which were so bright already. The Europeans, reduced in number, mounted guard in the two wards in turn. Sir Robert had insisted on taking the noon watch alone, averring that continuous night and day duty was child's play to him—merely a pleasant reminiscence of old times. When Harmar and the Doctor had relieved him, Grandier went into his chief's room with some question, and found him writing a letter. Hearing a step on the carpet, he half rose and looked round with a smile, then laughed in a shamefaced way.

"You'll say I'm dreaming now because I have had no sleep, Grandier, but the fact is I have had the most curious, most vivid sense of my wife's presence here all to-day. When you came into the room I felt as if she was standing behind me. Most tantalising to know that she's there, and not be able to see her!"

Grandier's thought naturally was that anxiety had turned Sir Robert's brain, but he could not well say so. "I'm sure, sir, Lady Charteris would be here if she could, but you must be thankful she can't," he remarked diplomatically.

"M-m," said Sir Robert, declining to acquiesce in the impossibility of his wife's presence, as the younger man noticed with irritation. "I wish you could have met her, Grandier. I used to picture myself introducing you all to her at home when we got back—but these things ain't for us to settle. She has been—what she has done for me no words can tell."

"Ah, sir, they don't make women like that nowadays, do they? I know I've never met one, anyhow."

"Well, well! They say every generation has the women it deserves," said Sir Robert with some amusement. "What have you young chaps been up to, Grandier?"

"Why, nothing, sir! There's some chance of your



being some good when a woman is willing to devote herself to you just as you are, and be just what you want, and make your interests hers. But nowadays they want to make you different from what you are, and they take up all sorts of things you don't care about—why, you never know where to have them, or what they'll expect of you next. No comfort to be got out of them at all."

"One might think you spoke from personal experience, but that's impossible, of course. Pity the women have spoilt you, Grandier."

"Sir?" with extreme surprise.

"Because, you see, you're on the wrong tack altogether, and I know you're a decent fellow at bottom, so it must be the ladies' fault, as you have just shown me they are to blame for everything."

"I see you think it's I who am to blame, sir."

"Well, what do you think about it? Instead of saying, 'Is she doing for me all I have a right to ask?' try saying, 'Is there anything else in the world that I—body, mind, or soul—can do for her?' for a bit, and see if that makes any difference."

"I see Gerrard gets his notions about women from you, sir."

"Uncommon clever of him if he does, since he's my wife's nephew, not mine," snapped Sir Robert. "But don't think I want to hold up poor Arthur's 'notions,' as you call 'em, for your imitation. I know better, I hope."

"But they're so jolly unpractical—I beg your pardon, sir. You don't leave anything for the woman to do—you keep the man dancing attendance on her all his life."

"As I look at it," said Sir Robert, leaning back and playing with his pen, "the question simply don't arise. Suppose that a lady—we didn't talk about 'women' in my day—is good enough to take an interest in you, you meet as foreigners, neither of you speaking t'other's language. You communicate with one another at first in a third language, ordinary

everyday talk, but if you have any sense—sense of the possibilities before you, I mean—you set to work to learn hers. You must do it, if you're ever to be any good at all, though you come the most awful croppers when you're doing it. I did. Over and over again I thought I had done for myself for ever and ever, but she saw I meant well, and she let me try again."

"But don't you think she ought to learn your language, sir?" Grandier spoke almost with indignation.

"Ah, she did, she did! But if she does, never you set it down as a well-merited tribute to your many excellences, for it's purely an honour, totally undeserved. If she will do that for you, you're a lucky fellow. They won't all do it—perhaps they can't. Now there's my sister-in-law, Arthur's mother; she has never learnt a word of her husband's language all the years they've been married. But he, being the best of good fellows, speaks hers so perfectly that she has never even discovered there's another she don't know. A good many marriages are like that—on one side or the other—and you may rub along quite comfortably."

"Yes, sir?" as Sir Robert paused abruptly. "But the other kind is better?"

"The other kind? Well, it feels to me a mockery to sit here writing to my wife, when she is in the room with me, and if my eyes were opened I could see her."

"It'll be an awful blow to her—to hear——" began Grandier lamely.

"That's why I'm writing to her," was the conclusive reply.

"Then you think it must come to-night, sir?"

"I know it must come to-night. What else does this silence in the town mean? They are working up the mob—with drugs, very likely. Even if our two poor fellows come upon the expedition, it will be too late for us."

"I should be glad to put a letter into the cache, sir."

"All right. I shan't be closing it for an hour yet."

That will give us time to cement the edges of the stone with mud, and make it look a little more natural. So you have plenty of time to write."

Grandier went out, meeting Harmar on the verandah. It would not have been human nature not to try and work off a little of the irritation automatically engendered in the male bosom by the consciousness of an unwonted yielding to sentiment. So Grandier laughed unsympathetically.

"Been seeing any more ghosts?" he asked. "The old man has."

"You always talk as if we saw things that were not there," complained Harmar. "What you call 'ghosts' are absolutely real, you know. It's simply that you can't see them."

"Oh, you are madder than ever! Two or three like you would demoralise a whole expedition."

"Why? I can tell you that I have seen the cloud over this house lifting and lifting, until to-day it's almost gone. Nothing demoralising there, is there?"

"How in the world can I tell? Look here; did you see a shadow, or a winding-sheet, or whatever it is you *do* see, about Gerrard when he started?"

"No, I didn't. But, for the matter of that——" Harmar looked at him curiously, and was evidently about to add more, but changed his mind. "So long!" he said as he went in, and Grandier walked across to his own rooms. He sat down in Arthur's chair, in Arthur's place at the table, to write his letter, with a sort of superstitious feeling that there might be an influence about them that would help him in his task. For it is not an easy thing for a man, even when death is at hand, to confess that his has not been the highest way of love, and that in that respect he has been distanced by one whom he despised. It was all the harder because there was the temptation to let well alone, and do nothing. There was only the very slightest possibility that Noel would ever receive either the letter carried by Arthur or the one that he was now writing, and it would be so much easier and pleasanter

to leave her to think him calm and confident, as he had been when she saw him last. But there was a kind of compulsion on him to write—to wipe off the debt which he owed both to Arthur and to Noel. It was very perplexing; he could not see even now where he had gone wrong; but it seemed that in acting in the simplest and most obvious way he had been guilty of injustice to both of them, and it was incumbent upon him as an honest man to set it right. Therefore he wrote his letter—under constraint, not with the facile frankness that would have confessed him a sudden convert to Sir Robert's views, but with a grudging admission that he had been in the wrong, which from a man of his character meant far more than the words expressed. It was the last packet to be laid in the hole under the floor before the stone was replaced and the edges cemented with mud and cunningly sprinkled with dust.

This was just before sunset, when the Europeans, as they passed along the verandah to dinner—for routine must go on as usual—looked out over the masses of bloom in the garden, a little discoloured now when seen by daylight, but in this orange glow still of an unearthly whiteness against the dark walls. The Doctor made a time-honoured joke about the call there would be on his services in a week or two, when the peaches and apricots were at their hardest and greenest, and they sat down. But the meal had hardly begun when a message came from the Tracker havildar on guard at the gate that an armed mob was gathering in all the openings on the other side of the street in front, while almost at the same moment firing broke out from the roofs of the native houses abutting on the garden at the back. To attempt to hold the whole enclosure against a determined attack from several points would have been absurd with so small a force, and therefore, as had already been arranged, the sentries along the garden wall were called in and set to hold the house, the verandahs of which had been barricaded with sacks of earth. The walls of

the garden were much higher outside than inside, so that they would be difficult to scale without help from the top, but this very fact made them less serviceable in the way of cover than they would otherwise have been.

Even before Sir Robert and the rest reached the entrance-passage, the first rush had come. There was little fear for the gateway, which had been built up with sandbags to a depth of several feet, and the assailants had evidently no mind to expose themselves to the devastating fire which could be brought to bear from the two small windows commanding the door. They left the gateway severely alone, and carrying ladders, rushed to plant them at points carefully chosen as difficult for the fire of the defenders to reach. The Sepoys, steady as if on the range, fired at them as they ran forward, but for every man who fell, there seemed two ready to take his place. The wide street was filled with a shouting, cursing rabble, no doubt primed, as Sir Robert had expected, with artificial courage. They cursed the Elchi for deceiving them and leaving them to the mercy of the Sinites, and Ismail Beg for betraying them, and announced loudly that after the turn of the English, that of the Sinites in the city would come. They crowded up the ladders when they were placed, and fought hand to hand with the Sepoys on the wall, seizing the bayonets and trying to wrench them away. Driven down, they waited a moment, while a musketry fire was opened on the defenders from the opposite houses, then rushed up once more, with such desperate rashness that some of them succeeded in gaining the wall, and even leaped down into the courtyard. They seemed mad with hatred as they cut and slashed and stabbed, and even those who were beaten to their knees snatched and bit at the foe as the fight went on above them. Regular formations were impossible before the fury of that attack, but Sir Robert, with a band of wounded men and servants, held the entrance to the garden-passage, the only way of retreat, and the rest struggled to him there as they fought their way out of the fray. It was Grandier who seized his arm at

last, and directed his attention to the clouds of smoke which were beginning to swirl round them.

"They have been shooting fire-arrows from the roofs, sir! The whole place will be ablaze in a moment."

The danger was lest the narrow passage behind them should become impassable, and Sir Robert saw it and blew his whistle. His men disentangled themselves from the conflict as best they could, while those who had been defending the stable courtyard, where the attack had not been pressed home, came to their assistance and covered their retreat into the passage; then flung hastily into the entrance the sandbags which had been prepared in view of such an emergency. Even as they were doing it, he summoned them to retreat, and the roof of the passage—heavy tiles resting on beams of wood warped with summer heat and winter cold—fell in. For the moment they were shut off from their foes by a fiery furnace of smoke and flame, and they staggered across the garden to the house, carrying with them the body of Dr Lakeney, cut down while he stooped over a wounded man. Sir Robert's left arm hung useless, Grandier had a sword-cut on the head roughly bound up with a handkerchief, Harmar was limping painfully, and not one of the few men who followed them was without a wound of some sort. A Hindu water-carrier hobbled down to the tank and brought up a skin of water, and they drank thirstily—one after the other, without crowding.

"It won't be long now, sir," said Grandier.

"No—when the fire dies down. There ain't much to burn," said Sir Robert. "No! what's that?"

"A gun!" For one moment the same thought was in all their minds—help had come just in time. But even as they sought each other's eyes in incredulous hope, the ground shook under them, and the opposite side of the courtyard seemed to dissolve into smoke and flying fragments.

"No. It's they who have the gun," said Sir Robert, leading the way round the house and down the steps into the desecrated garden, where a broad path had

## England hath Need of Thee

been cut through the fruit-trees by the shot. "When they rush we will charge."

By force of habit he tried to transfer the sword to his left hand for a moment, found that he could not hold it, and laid it on the parapet of the tank where Noel had sat that day, then held out his right hand to Grandier and Harmar. "I am proud of you both. God bless you!"

"God bless you, sir!" they replied with one voice.

"And you too, boy. You have done well," said Sir Robert to Ismail Beg, who lifted the hand to his forehead. Then he turned to the natives.

"Brothers, your fathers faced death often with me in the old days. Now we meet him together."

Hands and tulwars flew up to the salute, and from the lips of sepoy and sowar alike there rolled the salutation he had not heard for a quarter of a century, "*Lal Sahib bahadar ki jai!*"<sup>1</sup> As he nodded pleased recognition of the compliment, the smoke-clouds, rising slightly, disclosed eager faces and weaponed hands. Both forces caught sight of one another at the same moment.

"Die hard!" said Sir Robert, and led the charge.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

## TOO LATE.

AFTER the long confinement between four walls, Arthur was conscious of the most curious sense of insecurity and bareness when he stood in the open street with Colonel Brown, though they lurked cautiously in the shadow. The precautions taken to mask their escape seemed to have been thoroughly successful, for they did not see a creature in the narrow lanes through which they passed at first. When they reached a wider street, there were still only a few people visible, all apparently in a great hurry, and very suspicious of all other passers-by. Matching their behaviour to this, they passed unhindered, and so came at last to the city wall. Sir Robert's efforts of the summer before had been successful in clearing the ramparts of vegetation, and making them a little less like shapeless mounds of earth, and Arthur feared that they might prove a real obstacle, since the towers built along them at intervals had been repaired, and garrisons appointed. But it was plain that Colonel Brown knew the Pahari nature better than he did, for he advanced boldly up the stairs of the first tower they reached—and sure enough, it was deserted, its guardians having taken only the one precaution of locking the gate below and removing the massive key. But for this the messengers would simply have had to open the gate and walk out, and as it was, it was unnecessary to dare the stagnant and slimy waters of the ditch below the wall. Each of



them carried a fair length of rope round his waist, and when these were knotted together, and passed round one of the rough mud-brick-pillars which supported the roof, the two ends were long enough to reach the bridge by which the gate was approached on the outside. Arthur slid down first, and held the ropes steady for Colonel Brown, then dislodged them with a jerk, and coiling them up, carried them in his hand. It seemed almost impossible to believe they were actually outside the city.

"I never thought we could possibly get through so easily," he said in a low voice as they walked swiftly away. "It almost seems as if we might all have escaped in the same way, now that we are no longer burdened with the Hindus."

"Quite impossible!" said Colonel Brown dogmatically. "Even if we had left all the horses and stores behind, the sight of such a company passing through the streets would have drawn attention, for if we had separated we could never have been sure of meeting again. And if we had all got past the gates, what could we have done outside, with no way of crossing the desert?"

"What we are going to do now, I suppose."

"Die, probably? Quite so, and every extra man would be an extra danger. The people would be up against us as soon as our escape was known, and this country is too thickly populated to allow much space for hiding. If we two get through it, we shall have conquered our second great difficulty, and then come the sands, which are the third and greatest."

"Have you any idea where to look for the expedition?"

"Only vaguely along the line between us and the mountains. But they may have wandered, or been wilfully led astray, so that they may be anywhere to the right or left of the proper direction, and when we find them, they may not be in a condition to do any good till we have found water for them."

"It seems absurd to think that a whole expedition—

thousands of men—should be able to get lost and die of thirst in a country of this size,” said Arthur.

“Tartar and Sinite armies have done it, and as for bands of fugitives, and caravans—why, the sands must be a perfect graveyard! But I don’t anticipate our meeting thousands of men. I agree with Sir Robert, that there is probably no idea of annexing Pahar—they are here simply to rescue us and retire. Therefore the expedition is probably halted at the foot of the mountains, holding the mouth of the pass, and a mobile force has been detached to make a dash for Khamish and bring us back. We must only hope it is large enough to leave traces of its passage if we come across its track. It’s wonderful how quickly the sand hides all signs that a caravan has passed.”

“But if it’s only a small force, the Sinites may attack it and wipe it out!”

“Oh no; the Sinites will be all that is friendly. If the Panaris attack, it will be able to deal with them. You think because the Government said they were not going to let Sinim have Pahar that they meant it. Not at all; it was simply an invitation to take it.”

Colonel Brown on the Government had a theme that might well have lasted him all night, so that it was perhaps fortunate that the sight of a large farm close at hand rendered silence advisable. Just beyond it, they very nearly fell into a trap. The moon shone brightly on the road, but happily they were keeping well in the shadow of the hedge, now thick with new leaves, and thus caught sight of a number of men barring their passage before they themselves were seen. Retreating a short way, they squeezed through the hedge and found a semblance of shelter in the bushes and tall reeds that fringed the course of an irrigation-channel, down which they waded some distance in a stooping position—a very uncomfortable mode of progression. The channel led into a canal of considerable width, which it was necessary to swim, carrying their clothes on their heads, but once on the other side they ventured to return to the road, though keeping a sharp look-out

for other posts. Evidently the one they had passed was exercising Colonel Brown's mind severely, for he carried on a kind of conversation with himself about it, half aloud.

"Why *there*? Why not immediately outside the wall, or else where the sands begin? They can't have calculated on our getting away—or why let us get so far? It must be to stop messengers, for they are far too few to oppose the expedition. Perhaps this was where they caught Abdul Karim, and they think some more may come the same way."

Arthur had no suggestion to make that would throw light on the difficulty, and they went on, taking the precaution, when they approached a bridge, of circling round and going through the water. Shortly before dawn Colonel Brown called a halt—not, as he was careful to explain, because he needed a rest, but because they must try and get beyond the limits of close cultivation before it was actually day, and their safety might depend upon their bodily strength if any early riser caught sight of them. Once in the sands, they would be comparatively safe from observation, and therefore he proposed to turn aside to a kind of tongue of desert that ran up into the cultivated land, instead of following the ordinary caravan-route, which naturally clung to water and greenery as long as possible. So they ate some of the food they had brought with them and refilled their water-bottles, and then turned across country in the grey light. They saw one or two early-rising farmers, spade in hand, going to clear their irrigation-channels, or perhaps to filch a little water from the government canal; but these, being muffled up and shivering, and disinclined for conversation, were easy to avoid, and by the time the sun was high they were plodding through the sand. The desert-journey had been trying enough to mounted travellers, but to those on foot it was an absolute purgatory, with the burning rays from above reflected back from the glittering particles below. The constant eddying of light sand-

wreaths against the shimmering sky made Arthur feel giddy, and so shifting was the footing that for every step he made in advance he seemed to slip back two. Still he toiled on grimly, only conscious of a growing conviction that if his companion was not leading them right, they were in for a very bad time indeed. But Colonel Brown had not spent many summers in Central Asia for nothing. His eyes could discern a stream of tendency among the sand-currents where others could see nothing but a perpetual flux, and in some miraculous way he kept a straight course amid the whirling eddies. How many hours they had been marching when he announced that it was now safe to return to the direct route Arthur did not know, but it might have been as many days, for after the lack of exercise of the past few months, his unaccustomed limbs moved wearily. At this point their otherwise featureless course was diversified by sandhills—molehills, so to speak, in the field of sand—which provided a certain amount of variety, though not of a charming kind. They had ceased to talk to one another now, unless there was anything important to say, for their mouths were far too dry and dusty, and therefore the sound of voices, when it reached them, carried for some distance. Arthur was too stupid with fatigue by this time to urge that prudence was advisable, and Colonel Brown pounded on up the hill they were mounting at the time without offering any remark. When they reached the top of it they both stopped short, for in the hollow on the other side were six men, sheltering from the sun as far as possible in burrows scooped in the sand. Both parties sighted one another at the same moment. Recollection<sup>1</sup> returned to Arthur, and his hand flew to his revolver.

"Rush them, I suppose?" he said quickly.

"No. Speak 'em fair. Don't show a weapon, as you value your life," was the swift answer, and Colonel Brown advanced down the hill, raising both hands to show he was unarmed.

## 310 England hath Need of Thee

"But they're Khatai. They'll stop us."

"Obey orders!" snapped the elder man fiercely. Such a tone, in one who was not even a regular soldier, was galling in the extreme, but Arthur reminded himself that Colonel Brown was in command, and swallowed the pill. The men below—descendants of Siuite settlers who had been forcibly converted to Islam by the Great Khan—had leapt to their feet, and armed with weapons hastily caught up, were regarding them suspiciously. Colonel Brown called out to them in Turki.

"We are messengers on our way to the English army. Let us pass in peace."

Taken aback by his frankness, the men lowered their weapons, and one who seemed to be the leader answered him. "We also were bidden to meet it and guide it to the city, but we cannot find it, so we are waiting here, where we can see it coming."

A glance showed Colonel Brown that between two sandhills there was a glimpse of the regular caravan-route, here more visible than usual owing to the greater hardness of the ground. He waxed confidential. "Stay here, by all means, and we will go on and meet them. We shall be glad of your help in guiding them from here to the city, for as you see, we have missed our way."

"But do you know where they are? How can you tell, when no messengers have passed?"

"Have you not heard of the magic wires by which the English speak to one another at a distance? You will see that we shall find them very soon."

"Then we will come with you," said the chief of the Khatai promptly. "Otherwise we should not be doing our duty by those that sent us."

"Come on at once, then," said Colonel Brown cheerfully. "Is it Hasrat or the Dadkhwah that has sent you?"

"Neither. These barbarians have no desire to welcome the English to Khamish. Rather would they see their army perish in the sands. It is because

of their grievous hostility to the Elchi Beg and his company that we are sent out to bring help to them in time."

"Sent out to guide the force astray," said Colonel Brown to Arthur in English, in a loud and jovial tone much at variance with the tenor of his words.

"But they couldn't hope to mislead them indefinitely, surely?"

"Speak cheerfully. I should say there is a Sinite army on the march for Khamish, and they only want to keep our men out of the way until it's in possession of the city."

"But why are we fraternising with these fellows?"

"Ah, that was a bad shot. I thought they knew where the force was. Now we shall all have to look for it together."

"And you think we shall be allowed to meet it?"

"Can't you remember to talk as if everything was going as well as possible? One of us *must* meet it. That's why it's all-important to give them no excuse to search us. We may be able to signal with our revolvers, or one of us may be able to break away while the other keeps these fellows in check. So talk and laugh as if you were absolutely happy. It's the only chance for Sir Robert and the rest. Ready?" he said smilingly in Turki to the leader of the Khatai, who had now packed up their possessions and were waiting. "We have a good way to go, but we ought to get there before night."

He stepped off with jaunty energy, and Arthur, invigorated not only by the short rest but by the keen consciousness of danger, did his best to emulate him. For it was quite clear that their companions—who might almost be called their captors—were still suspicious. With every appearance of good fellowship, one walked on each side of Colonel Brown, and following them one on each side of Arthur, the remaining two coming behind, evidently on the alert for any attempt to escape. There was to be no opportunity of shaking them off, and it was not clear

whether it would be more dangerous to catch sight of the expedition or not to do so. Arthur did his best to dispel suspicion by chattering Turki, but his guardians responded only in a surly manner. Moreover, he was so tired that as time went on he almost fell asleep as he walked, and that he was talking nonsense he was several times made painfully aware by Colonel Brown, who turned round with a savage admonition delivered in the most cheerful and winning of tones.

Somehow or other they plodded on through the sultry afternoon, the countenances of their escort growing blacker and blacker. Even Colonel Brown's wiry frame was becoming exhausted, and Arthur felt as if he would give anything on earth for leave to throw himself on the sand and lie there. The sun had sunk and the afterglow was lighting the sky when the Khatai leader seemed to make up his mind that this weary walk was not good enough.

"You are leading us astray," he growled ferociously. "Doubtless you are Pahari spies, whose intent is to prevent our guiding the English army into Khamish."

"Nothing of the kind!" said Colonel Brown, with desperate briskness. "It will not be much farther now. If you prefer it, we will go on alone, and come back to you."

The captors laughed, and that one fact was more alarming than all their surliness. "No," said the leader, "we do not part. But we will turn aside and rest awhile till the moon rises. You shall eat with us."

"We may not stop," said Colonel Brown. "But we need not drag you on with us."

"We would not choose to drag you in with us," said the leader politely. "But stop you must."

"Shall we cut?" asked Arthur in English, with a highly creditable laugh.

"No good. We must pretend to comply, and look out for a chance of getting away," smiled Colonel Brown. "Indeed we will press on no farther, for

we are spent with hunger," he informed the leader cheerfully. "Joyfully will we accept your hospitality."

"Never have you eaten such a meal as you shall eat to-night, old man," said the leader. Was there something ominous in his tone or not? "There is a ruin this way where we shall find shelter."

They turned aside from the track, such as it was, towards a group of sandhills which evidently marked the site of buildings of some sort. Even in the dim light a broken wall could be seen here and there from which some chance wind had stripped the sand, leaving it gaunt and bare. From a hole at the base of one of these the glow of firelight was visible.

"This must have been a Buddhist monastery in Sinite times," said Colonel Brown conversationally to Arthur. "Of course the Great Khan destroyed them all."

Arrived at the hole, they were obliged to stoop low to enter it, and then found themselves at the head of a flight of steps. The smoke of the fire made it difficult to see farther, but the echoes seemed to show that they were in a large underground room. Coughing and with watering eyes they groped their way down the steps, to find themselves the target of the concentrated gaze of some ten or twelve men sitting round the fire. For one moment the thought of flight crossed Arthur's mind, but he saw it was out of the question. Their original captors were behind them, and the way out was very narrow. One of the faces before him seemed to be familiar, and with a kind of feeling that he had known the truth all along he recognised the Argoon interpreter who had accompanied the Mission from Kok and disappeared only the other day. The man was evidently unwilling to meet his eye, and tried to hide himself behind another, as Colonel Brown saluted the group amicably. They made no attempt to return the civility, and the leader of the captors called out something in Sinite.

"Khamish lies due north from here," said Colonel



Brown in English to Arthur, apparently apropos of nothing.

"Man there speaks English," growled Arthur warningly, indicating the half-concealed figure of the interpreter.

"Silence, sons of shame!" came from behind them in Turki. Colonel Brown faced round upon the speaker with elaborate indignation.

"What does this mean?" he demanded. "We are here as your guests. Is this your hospitality?"

"You are spies and treacherous guides," retorted the leader. "Why have you led us astray all day?"

"We have led you perfectly right. Is it our fault that you would not go far enough, or even let us go on?"

"Then where is the army of the English?"

"That I can't tell you, but if you will go on with us we shall meet it."

"You will not go on, but you will tell us where it is."

"You must make a dash when I say 'go'," said Colonel Brown hurriedly to Arthur. "I'll cover your rear. It is impossible to say where the army is now, since we missed our way and you have detained us here," he went on in Turki, with every appearance of calm argument; "but we will bring you to it if you will let us go on."

"Nay, but your magic wires can tell you where it is, as you said. Consult them, and tell us."

"Well, then, it is at the wells of Ala Kum," said Colonel Brown desperately—"waiting for us since yesterday."

"Is this so?" asked the leader of one of the men round the fire.

"No, it is a lie, for I came from Ala Kum this morning, and there was no sign of any army."

"Sold again! I thought it might gain us a few hours while they sent to see," murmured Colonel Brown to Arthur. "I have told you what I can. If the wires have lied to me, is it my fault?" he demanded indignantly. "Go!" he added in a sharp

whisper, and his revolver was in his hand. Arthur had been waiting for the signal, and was through the group and half-way up the steps even before the first shot was fired. But one of the men he had thrust aside caught him by the long skirt of his kaftan, and another, suddenly appearing from the top of the steps, knocked him back. He fell headlong into a furious *mêlée* of which Colonel Brown was the centre, escaped shots and stabs as by a miracle, struggled to his feet, and made another dash for the steps. His revolver was still hanging from its lanyard, and he fired at two or three men who tried to bar his way. There was only the man at the top of the stair to pass, and he aimed straight at him and pulled the trigger. But for the moment he had forgotten what Grandier had remembered—that the last chamber of his revolver always missed fire once. There was no report, and the man flung him back once more into the hands that were clutching at him from behind. He struggled furiously, but was helpless against the numbers opposed to him, and found himself disarmed and bound hand and foot in an instant. Colonel Brown, insensible from a blow on the head, but bound in like manner, lay beside him. At the command of the leader, some of the Khatai hauled them up and propped them in a sitting position against the wall. Then all retired to the other side of the fire, and looked at them in cold silence. This was worse than the interrogations that had preceded the fight, and Arthur felt his hair rising. What did it portend?

With their eyes still fixed on their prisoners, the captors began to talk with one another in Sinite, without animation or apparent interest, their very lack of warmth adding to the horror. The only person who displayed any feeling was the interpreter, who seemed to be urging some point with vehemence, and controverting the arguments of the rest. Presently he came round the fire, and kicked Arthur as a delicate means of rousing his attention.

"You not his son?" he asked eagerly in English,

## 316 England hath Need of Thee

with a glance aside at Colonel Brown, who had just opened his eyes.

"Rather not!" said Arthur in astonishment, and gathered that his response was considered to have taken the form of a most solemn oath. Colonel Brown, with the blood running down his face, smiled wryly.

"You know what that means?" he said. "They are going to make us tell them what they want to know. If you had been my son, they would have gone to work on you first, in hopes of persuading me quicker. As it is, you will have the pleasure of seeing me experimented upon before your turn comes."

"But we can't tell them where the force is!"

"That don't signify. They think we can. And we shall probably tell 'em a good many things before they've finished with us. But they won't wait to see if they're true."

Many times over, in the period that followed—it may have been only hours, perhaps minutes, but it felt like endless days—Arthur wished despairingly that the dreadful choice had fallen upon him first. Never had it entered his mind that human beings could devise, or that poor human nature could sustain, a tithe of the horrible inventions he saw put in practice on the helpless form of his companion. And when the tormentors paused at last, to prepare some final and supreme torment, that on which they had been working was scarcely human in its semblance—a seared mass of racked nerves and wrenched sinews. And the irony of it all was that there was nothing to tell. Arthur had shouted it unceasingly, with prayers, with oaths, even with burning tears, until he was roughly gagged, but the torturers were no whit moved.

Something fell at his side. The interpreter had just passed between him and the fire, and mechanically he turned his head to look. It was his revolver—with its one cartridge, as he knew, still unfired. Never was cooling stream so welcome to weary wanderer as the sight of that small dark weapon.

It promised release, deliverance, safety from all the hellish devices that were lying . . . wait for him—a clean, speedy, merciful death. Rolling over on his face, he could reach the revolver with his bound hands, and if his numbed fingers could not be forced into pulling the trigger, he deserved—what he would get.

But as he shifted himself painfully, preparatory to rolling over, he met the awful entreating gaze of the eyes in that disfigured face—eyes purposely left uninjured to the last that they might miss no particle of the terrors to come. There was no mistaking the message they conveyed, and his heart rose in wild revolt. His one chance! the last kindness that could be done him by the only friend at hand! without which he himself must become even as *that*! Still the eyes appealed, entreated—all the more poignant in their prayer because there were no lips nor tongue with which to speak—and with his elbow Arthur pushed the revolver slowly towards the marred hand which lay nearest him. He lay waiting in agonized anxiety. What if his sacrifice should be fruitless, if that inestimable last shot should profit neither of them? But it came, with a crack like thunder, and it did not need the wrathful exclamations of the baffled torturers to assure him that it had done its work.

"Fool! fool!" the words hissed across the fire came meaningless to Arthur as he in his turn was seized and dragged into the light. He had a vague impression that the interpreter had crept away with hanging head, but for the moment his senses were lulled in a kind of sleep—a dreamlike curiosity as to what was going to happen. Only too soon he knew. The gag had been removed, his left arm was bound palm to shoulder—an excruciating position for any length of time when the lashings are tight—his right was fixed at the elbow in a kind of vice. They were bringing a curious little machine, something like a pair of nutcrackers—was it to tear out his nails?

## England hath Need of Thee

He set his teeth and prayed wildly that whatever happened he might not disgrace the English name. No, it was not that. With horrible, relentless precision the diabolical contrivance went backwards and forwards, breaking in turn the first joint of the thumb, the first, second, third and fourth fingers, then the second joint, then the third, inflicting fresh agony at each operation. Oh, heavens! now they were starting upon the palm of his hand! With an inconsequence all too pat there returned to him the recollection of the sufferings of a friend wounded in the hand in a frontier skirmish. "Worst possible place to get hit, so far as the pain's concerned," the surgeon had remarked to him. "Nothing I can do will make him believe I am not trying my level best to torture him." And these men meant to torture! Arthur flung back his head and laughed. A gleam of something like satisfaction crossed the inscrutable countenances of his tormentors. They knew what that hoarse, discordant, mad laugh meant. In another moment he would be whimpering like a child.

Something fell across Arthur—something heavy and soft and wet. The rooting at his hand had ceased. He went to sleep. Some one shook him, was asking him something. He said, "Khamish—due north," and went to sleep again.

An indefinite time afterwards he woke again, fierce pain in every joint and sinew of his tortured hand.

"So the Queen's telegram was no good," some one was saying.

"Too late, like everything else. H.M. won't be pleased. They say she was awfully keen on rescuing Charteris—used to prod the Premier about it regularly every morning."

"Curious thing his wife's dying the very day he was killed."

"Jolly happy thing, if you ask me. Somebody told me they were awfully devoted—just like a book."

Arthur stirred painfully, and they were at his side in a moment. "Ask him—quick!" said one.

"Can you tell me whether there is any place where Sir Robert Charteris would be likely to put his important papers for safe-keeping, Gerrard?" asked the other, whose face was familiar years ago in India. Mess, orderly-room, field-days, floated in a confused phantasmagoria through Arthur's mind.

"In—the safe. No, that's not it. Under the floor—reception-room floor, sir. You prise up a greenish stone—sorry to be such an owl, sir!" he tried to salute. "Oh, my arm!" he cried shrilly. "Something's hurting it most awfully—— Beg your pardon, sir. I don't know what's come to me, but this infernal—— Oh, I say——"

"Here, let me look at it," said the other man quickly. "Perhaps the bandages are too tight." He unfastened a perfect cloud of bandages—Arthur remembered afterwards that they were disposed so that he could not see the injured limb—and fiddled about a little.

"No, that's not it. That's my elbow, and it's my hand that's—— Oh-h-h—it's like being ground in a mill."

"All right, all right!" said his Colonel soothingly. His eyes were very kind and very pitiful. "The Doctor will give you something to make you sleep in a minute. Think of home and your people, and you'll dream all sorts of jolly dreams—eh?"

"But that's not the Doctor. Oh, I say, there was something I wanted to know, and I can't think——"

"Drink this," said the surgeon.

## CHAPTER XXV.

## ALL THAT WERE LEFT OF THEM.

THE Pahar Expedition was a dead failure. Despatched to rescue Sir Robert Charteris and his Mission, it had brought back only one maimed European and rescued one mortally wounded sowar, who had crawled into some corner to die, and been overlooked by the mob. Nor had it even the doubtful satisfaction of punishing the murderers, for that had been done most thoroughly before its arrival—so thoroughly, indeed, that there was really no one left to punish. The smoking ruins of Khamish were occupied by a Sinite army, and the British General was received with all ceremony by a bland Sinite Amban, in blue and cherry-coloured satin. From his lips was taken down the full story of the massacre—setting forth how Pahar had repented of its former rebellion and determined to return to the Sinite fold, and the Amban had been deputed to take over the government; how Sir Robert Charteris and his Mission had incurred the hatred of the people owing to the suspicion that they were in Khamish to prevent this desirable consummation, and how the hatred had deepened owing to their persistent refusal to depart, and their rash declarations that a British force was on its way to annex Pahar to India; how the news that such a force was actually at hand had goaded the people to madness, and stimulated them to deeds of blood; how the Amban, observing the temper of the populace, had sent off messenger after messenger to

hasten the march of his army—but alas! in vain; how it had arrived, footsore and almost worn-out, in time only to wreak a terrible vengeance on the hordes sacking the Elchi Khana, and when the general population took part with the murderers, to proceed methodically to wipe it out. Could more have been done? The British General, looking round on what had been Khamish, was forced to own that nothing could. In the absence of evidence, the Sinites could hardly be held to blame for what had happened, and they had certainly taken the strongest possible steps to prevent anything of the kind happening in future. They even went so far as to promise, purely as an act of grace, compensation to the relatives of any Hindus who had suffered through becoming involved in the retributive measures, and this was quite as much as could have been expected. Everything had been thought of, and the General's orders were strict—in no circumstances to be drawn into occupying Pahar, or even remaining there—he was simply to withdraw the Mission and retire. It was unfortunate that he had only arrived in time to bury the Mission—which was done with every possible honour, the Sinite authorities attending in full state—but that done, the other part of the order had to be carried out. Pahar was evacuated, and left to the tender mercies of its Sinite rulers.

Of course everybody was not satisfied. Some people never are satisfied. The Opposition were unreasonable enough to allege that the Mission might have been withdrawn quite safely had the Expedition only been despatched a little sooner. The Government spokesmen pointed out in reply that it had been an act of Christian magnanimity to send an Expedition at all to rescue a person who deliberately disobeyed the orders sent him again and again to retire. The Opposition asked how Sir Robert Charteris was to retire when the means of doing so were denied him, and the Ministerialists waived the point gracefully. Any right-minded Envoy would have succeeded in



retiring while the way was still open to him, but it was unfortunately clear that Sir Robert Charteris was the very last man who ought to have been chosen for the post. His past record had been overlooked, he had been recalled from obscurity and placed once more in a responsible position, and he had carried his malice against his benefactors so far as even to die in the way most calculated to embarrass them. When the Opposition asked what were Sir Robert's instructions, the Government produced the written orders triumphantly. If, as it was understood Sir Robert's nephew, the sole survivor of the Mission, asserted, the unfortunate man was under the impression that these had been somewhat modified by word of mouth, it only showed how the mind could be warped by natural prepossession. By this time people were getting a little tired of the matter, and though for some little while a speaker at a Ministerialist meeting could always be roused to fury by the cry of "Remember Khamish!" from an opponent judiciously entrenched in a far corner of the room, other cries soon arose to take its place, and Mission and Expedition were alike forgotten. And the waves of Sinite culture overflowed Pahar as relentlessly and destructively as the sand-waves submerged her ruined towns and neglected water-ways. And the dead slept sound.

What of the living? The Mission Hospital at Sheonath received a patient in such dire extremity of body and mind that it would have been fatal to carry him farther. The journey across the mountains and through Further Bala with the returning Expedition was certainly calculated to furnish abundant mental distraction, but probably a man whose right hand had been amputated, who had been exposed to torture and seen his companion succumb under it, and who was the survivor of an appalling calamity, needed quiet rather than distraction. In the modest ward appropriated to European patients, Arthur lay day after day, uncomplaining, unexact, but with perpetual horror in his eyes. To him one day came Dr Weaver, smart,

alert, keen-eyed—a fine surgeon wasted as a medical missionary, so worldlings averred in disgust—and shook his head.

"I hoped I should be able to let your friends see you to-day," he said, "but how can I when you go on looking like this? They would never be happy again."

"My friends?" asked Arthur, without interest.

"Two ladies. That letter you have is addressed to one of them, I think—Miss Noel Brown."

Undoubtedly there was a slight change of expression. "Are they here?" asked the patient.

"I should think they were! Been waiting here even before you arrived, coming every day to see how you were—longing to see you."

"I should like—to see them. But not—the letter—just yet."

"All right—not till you feel stronger, of course. I'll let them know you are prepared for visitors."

So Miss Travis and Noel were admitted, and sat by Arthur's bed, and talked pleasantly and softly of common things, with what was nothing less than heroism. They were living in a houseboat on the lake, they told him, and Bumpus was there, of course, and the servants and boatmen did not dare to move if he so much as looked at them. The missionaries were so kind, and the scenery here was so lovely, and Arthur must come to tea as soon as he felt a little better. Dr Weaver was well satisfied with the result of his experiment when he came to turn the visitors out. The look of horror was gone, at any rate for the time, and for once the patient slept naturally at night.

All through the lovely late summer of Bala Miss Travis and Noel continued their work as hospital visitors, with an assiduity which was the more remarkable in the former's case, because she had demurred strongly on the ground of propriety to their going to Sheonath at all. Noel had thought of nothing else since the first telegram that told of the disaster to the Mission and Arthur's grievous state, and when the clash of wills came she enjoyed the advantage of pre-

paration against an unprepared adversary. The moral reputation of Bala as a summer resort was not wholly impeccable in those days, and Miss Travis was genuinely alarmed at the thought of going there without a male protector. To which Noel retorted that Miss Travis knew every missionary in India, and some of them were sure to be there, and if that was not protection and guarantee enough, what would be? Moreover, if darling Travy refused to go with her, she was going by herself, and if darling Travy thought that would be any better——! Miss Travis capitulated, with the expression of a gentle regret that after all that had happened, dear Noel should still be so undisciplined. She did not foresee the very efficacious discipline that would be provided by the circumstances of those summer months, when Noel was for the first time taken—one might almost say snatched—out of herself by the appeal of another's need, and forgot her own wishes and preoccupations in what would please and interest the patient. Such unexpected tact did she develop that Miss Travis, sitting by with her knitting, was astounded, though permitting herself the caustic reflection that had Arthur known beforehand the cost of awakening altruism in a self-centred girl, even his chivalry might have jibbed at the price.

But if it was Noel who kept the invalid amused, and charmed by slow degrees the horror from his eyes, it was Miss Travis who did most to restore him to his former self. An apparently chance remark of hers as to the extra work imposed on the doctors and the one English nurse by the presence of a European in hospital awoke the ruling passion once more in Arthur. As soon as he began to walk about, Dr Weaver and his brother found themselves haunted by a gaunt figure with hollow eyes and one arm in a sling, eager to be of use, and Nurse declared that in her dreams she heard his anxious question, "I say, is there anything else I can do?" Miss Travis herself had relieved them of the duty of writing to his parents every week, and she continued the correspondence until he was able to

produce weird and wonderful missives with his left hand. Nowadays Colonel and Mrs Gerrard would have rushed out to India to see their son and bring him home, but thirty years ago people, even old Indians, regarded the voyage with far more respect, as a thing only to be faced at the call of absolute necessity. Moreover, Colonel Gerrard was intensely engrossed in the attempt to induce Parliament to do justice to Sir Robert Charteris's memory, so that he and his wife were deeply grateful to Miss Travis, whose letter to Lady Charteris from Khamish had cheered the days of that sad winter, when it seemed hopeless to rouse England to take any step for the rescue of those who were in jeopardy at her behest, and had been clasped in her dying hand. They did not even press for Arthur's instant return home as soon as he could travel, when once Miss Travis had transmitted his Colonel's unofficial promise to move heaven and earth and the War Office to keep him in the Service if he could become only reasonably expert with his left hand.

The summer was waning before Arthur was able to accept that invitation to tea on board the houseboat. It involved quite an expedition—through the city, out to the Mogul Emperor's gardens, and through the fleet of houseboats which lined the shores—and Dr Weaver was by no means anxious for him to attempt it even then. But the matter of Grandier's letter lay on Arthur's conscience. He had not delivered it, for he had never seen Noel alone, and it seemed probable he would not as long as he was at the hospital. He shrank more and more from giving it to her, for it seemed to him that to do so would bring back all the old unhappy far-off things which they had tacitly agreed to ignore in the fools' paradise of the last month or two. Perhaps she had learnt to bear with resignation Grandier's valiant death, to which the native survivor had borne witness, but in receiving his last message she would realise more fully than ever what she had lost—and what would be her resentment

against the inferior man who lived on when her splendid lover was dead! But the reluctance he felt brought its own antidote in the realisation that he was actually robbing his dead friend of the grief due to his memory, and he made his appointment and kept it.

It was with something of a shock that he found, when he arrived in a fast *shikara* boat, guarded by the servant who was detailed, as he complained, to prevent his taking a step or lifting a finger for himself, that his friends' houseboat was only one of many, and that the sward of the gardens and the waters of the lake alike swarmed with holiday-making Europeans. Noel and Miss Travis had always seemed so curiously isolated, especially from other women, that it was surprising to hear them talk of paying calls and going out to tea. He did not notice, as Grandier would have done at once, that Noel's white frock and black-ribboned hat were now like those of other girls—but then, as she told herself with an impatient shrug, he would not have noticed if she had worn a sack! She and Miss Travis had made great preparations to receive him. Tea was laid on board the boat, that they might be more private, their friends had been warned against gratifying their natural desire to catch a glimpse of the Khamish survivor, there were flowers everywhere, and Arthur's tastes in the way of cake had been remembered and consulted. Bumpus recollected him with effusion, and came at once to sit on his knee, which was a warm and weighty and slightly cumbersome honour. And yet the contrast between past and present forced itself upon the memory of all as it had not done in the hospital, though both ladies were insistently cheerful. When Arthur spoke of his voyage through the city, and the roof-gardens which diversified the crazy old houses on either bank of the river, Noel said unguardedly, "Oh yes, isn't it like the asters and things at Khamish?" and could have bitten her tongue out for her carelessness. But Arthur was in too resolutely good spirits to take any notice. He

was progressing by leaps and bounds in his new education, he informed them.

"I really can write quite a decent letter now," he said with pride, "and I actually tried fencing this morning. Yar Khan, the *chaprasi*, is an old soldier, and took me on like a Briton. It's a bit awkward at first, but think how awfully surprised the enemy will be! He won't have a notion how to parry left-handed cuts. And as to riding, I'm getting on like a house afire. Wasn't it a blessing that the Colonel managed to rescue Rajah for me from the clutches of the Sinites? You see, he knows my voice, and that gives me a tremendous pull. Presently, when I get a hook to screw on, like Captain Cuttle, I must have some sort of clasp made as well, to hold the reins in riding. Can't always have an orderly with a leading-rein, can I? Look rather bad when I'm a field officer. No, my idea is something that would fasten with a snap, that I could open in a moment with my other hand, but that would stay absolutely firm when it was once shut."

"Like a dress-holder," said Noel, with every appearance of acute interest, and she even went and fetched one of those useful inventions, by which the trained skirt of the period could be looped up so as not to sweep the streets. That Noel should even be acquainted with such a thing spoke volumes for the change in her mental surroundings. But when she showed him how it was worked, guiding his unaccustomed fingers to the spring, something in his clumsy left-hand touches destroyed all the self-command for which she had so laboriously striven, and she jumped up and ran into the cabin with a choking sob. Miss Travis rose nobly to the occasion.

"Perhaps she has gone to fetch my dress-holder," she said, with a creditable smile. "It is rather a different pattern. Dear me, Mr Gerrard! do let me relieve you of Bumpus; I am sure he is much too heavy. Come to Missus, Bumpus dear, and lie on her gown."

But Bumpus resisted her blandishments with a blink of lazy eyes, and stretched himself and stuck his claws into the visitor's leg in the most friendly manner.

"Oh, do let the beggar stay, Miss Travis," said Arthur. "He's enjoying himself awfully, I'm sure, and there are no decent cats at our place—only wild ones that scare the life out of you by getting into your room in the night. Can't think why Indian cats are such beasts, can you?"

Miss Travis's reply was unintelligible, and looking at her, Arthur was horrified to see her face screwed up into extraordinary contortions. Being a gentleman, he looked away, but found his eyes irresistibly drawn to her again. Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Oh, I say, is there anything I can do?" he asked anxiously.

"If I have said once, to myself and Noel," cried Miss Travis explosively, "'Now we must be cheerful; we *will* be cheerful,' I have said it fifty times. And I meant to be. But to see your poor fingers fumbling——"

"Oh, I say, please——!" he expostulated in anguish.

"I know. I know I am making it worse for you. I know I ought to be ashamed of myself. And I am." She blew her nose with a fierceness which seemed to imply that it was solely to blame. "I never thought I could be so unkind—so wickedly unkind. But one seems to realise it all at once, somehow——"

"Oh, Travy darling, what a cold you have got!" said Noel, appearing opportunely, with very pink eyelids, from the cabin immediately behind Miss Travis's chair. "And I couldn't find your dress-holder anywhere. You do keep your things rather in disorder, don't you, darling?" Miss Travis bristled wrathfully, and her tears disappeared as though by magic. "Well, I am starving," Noel went on, sitting down and hauling at the reluctant Bumpus. "Come

long, you bad cat. Don't you see that Mr Gerrard wants to hand the cakes?"

Thanks to her interposition, the meal passed without further *contretemps*, and thereafter Miss Travis took up her large white umbrella, and announced solemnly that she was going to call upon Mrs Maynard, three boats off. Noel and Arthur were left together, sheltered by the cabin from the view of the promenaders on the bank, while the youths and girls who rowed or paddled up and down outside the ranks of houseboats were generally too much engrossed in their own—and each other's—affairs to take any notice of them. Arthur's face was set a little sternly as he drew the fateful letter from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Grandier asked me to give you that. I promised," she said laconically.

He watched with apprehension to see what she would do, without appearing to look at her. Would she burst into tears again? would she faint? To his extreme amazement she took up the box of fuses which had been put on the table in case he should wish to smoke, struck one, applied it to the corner of the letter, and deliberately burned the whole thing, dropping the last fragment on the ash-tray.

"Oh, I say!" he cried, when he found his voice at last, "and the poor chap was so awfully gone on you!" The coolness with which she had acted seemed so incredibly callous and cruel that he could not trust himself to say what he felt. But Noel looked at him with eyes that glistened with tears.

"It was his own wish," she said softly. "He begged me to do it."

"He—begged you?"

"Yes, he wrote another letter, the day he—the day it all happened. It was found in the cache with Sir Robert's papers, and your Colonel gave it to me himself. I'll show you—this is what he says— Oh!" she had taken another letter from her pocket and was glancing through it. Then, with slightly heightened colour, she folded it carefully so that only a part of



the page was visible, and passed it across the table to him. He read:—

"One last kindness I will ask of you. If Gerrard gets through, he will bring you a letter from me, which he has promised to deliver into your own hands. May I beg of you to burn it unopened? I ought never to have written it—still less asked him to take charge of it. You know why. Tell him——"

"Yes?" said Arthur, trying to turn the page and read on.

"That's all. The rest doesn't signify."

"But it's a message to me. Please let me see it." He was holding the paper firmly as she tried to take it back.

"No, it's a mistake. Please give it to me."

"But I have a right to know what it is. Kindly——"

"I will never forgive you if you read it!" she cried hotly. Then her fingers suddenly relaxed their hold on the paper. "But of course I can't struggle with you for it," she said.

As she had divined would be the case, he dropped the paper as if it had been a hot coal. "I beg your pardon," he said, rather pale. "If I can't be any good to any one, at least I needn't make myself a nuisance to them."

"Nonsense!" she cried angrily. "Why do you try to make me out such a wretch? You know I didn't mean that. You will soon be able to do as well as anybody. Why, you handed things just now beautifully."

"Good thing, if that's all I am to be fit for in future."

"It isn't! You're not to say it! Everybody will be expecting you to help them as you have always done. Are you going to disappoint them?"

"You forget——" his voice was hoarse. "I can never be now what you called me once—'a steady hand to hold.'"

"No, I know," the tears were in her eyes again. Then a great resolution seized her. "But do you

know how the verse ends? You asked me once, and I wouldn't tell you. Now I will show you if you like."

He assented wearily. The matter seemed curiously unimportant, yet her eyes were shining. She went into the cabin and returned with a book, and standing behind his chair, laid it on the table before him. "Oh, I didn't remember I'd made all those marks!" she cried in dismay as she turned the pages. The verse at which she had arrived was deeply underlined, and "A. G." was written in the margin.

"And what am I to you? A steady hand  
To hold, a steadfast heart to trust withal;  
Merely a man that loves you, and will stand  
By you, whate'er befall."

He sighed as he read. "Yes, that's true," he said. "But I didn't mean to tell you."

"But I knew," said Noel softly.

"You--knew?" Immense astonishment was in his tone.

"Before we left Khamish. Why, how do you think I could have lived through last winter if I hadn't?"

"It's very good of you not to mind."

Noel could have shaken him for the humble hopelessness of his voice. "Mind? What do you mean?"

"Oh no; of course there's no reason why you should mind, is there? It's not as if you thought I should presume upon your kindness to a poor wretched—you can trust me that much."

"I really shall shake you!" Noel's exasperation was amazing and mysterious to her auditor, who could not see her face. "Well, if you must—— Read that!" She dashed down Grandier's letter before him again.

"But you said you would never forgive me if I read it!"

"Well, now I will never forgive you if you don't!"

He could hear her sharp breathing, and feel that her

## 332 England hath Need of Thee

gripping fingers were shaking the back of his chair as he read:—

"Tell him I know now—I think I knew it before you went away, but I would not let myself believe it—that he has won what I hoped to win, what I thought in my conceited folly I had won. I didn't deserve it, but he does, and you are right to love him, because he loves you in the right way——"

"Oh no, no!" cried Arthur, stopping suddenly. "You can't mean it, Noel! It's only pity, and I won't let you sacrifice yourself——"

"Then," said Noel, with a hysterical little laugh, "it was very unkind of you to make him think it was love."

"You know I didn't mean that. I pity you, indeed!" He had managed to turn round and face her.

"It really isn't very nice of you to say so, at any rate," persisted Noel. "But of course I know why."

"Oh, I can't stand this!" With a sudden effort, he succeeded in freeing himself from the chair, in which she was unconsciously keeping him a prisoner. "What do you mean by pretending that I pity you?"

"Why, you said so! For caring for you when you don't care, I suppose. It's better to know——" but she was denied the opportunity of saying anything more.

"Travy darling, Arthur has something to tell you," said Noel, when Miss Travis returned from her call.

"Noel has promised to marry me," said Arthur proudly. "Of course I know—I'm afraid you'll think——" he added anxiously, but Noel interrupted him.

"Don't wander off into byways, Arthur. But I suppose you see poor darling Travy is trying hard to look pleased, and can't. Did you think we were going to leave you desolate, Travy?"

"Oh, my dear, of course a way will be opened! You mustn't think of me," cried Miss Travis anxiously.

"But we have thought of you. You are coming to live with us."

"And Bumpus too," said Arthur. "I decline to think of any place as home without Bumpus."

"And when Arthur goes out on wars and expeditions, he will feel quite safe leaving you to take care of me," said Noel.

"Oh, my dears, this is too much! I couldn't think of it!" protested Miss Travis tearfully, but Arthur left Noel for a moment and took her hand.

"There are only us three left of all who went to Khamish, Miss Travis. We must always stick together."

THE END.



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